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THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS

By KEITH BENNETT

Some day there will be a legend like this. Some day, from steamy Venus or arid Mars, the shaking, awe-struck words will come whispering back to us, building the picture of a glory so great that our throats will choke with pride—pride in the Men of Terra!



With a gobbling yell, gray, man-like figures came leaping among them.

THE COMMANDER'S VOICE went droning on, but Hague's fatigued brain registered it as mere sound with no words or meaning. He'd been dazed since the crash. Like a cracked phonograph, his brain kept playing back the ripping roar of jet chambers blowing out with a sickening lurch that had thrown

every man in the control room to the floor. The lights had flickered out, and a sickening elevator glide began as Patrol Rocket One smashed down through the Venusian rainforest roof, and crashed in a clearing blasted by its own hurtling passage.

Hague blinked hard and tried to focus his brain on what hard-faced Commander

Devlin was saying, something about the Base and Odysseus, the mother ship.

"We've five hundred miles before we'll be in their vicinity, and every yard of it we walk. Hunting parties will shoot food animals. All water is to be boiled and treated with ultra-violet by my section. The photographers will march with the science section, which will continue classifying and writing reports. No actual specimens will be taken. We can't afford the weight."

To Hague, the other five men seated around the little charting table appeared cool, confidently ready to march through five hundred, or a thousand miles of dark, unexplored, steaming Hell that is Venusian rainforest. Their faces tightset, icily calm, they nodded in turn as the Commander looked at each one of them; but Hague wondered if his own face wasn't betraying the fear lurking within him. Suddenly Commander Devlin grinned, and pulled a brandy bottle from his pocket, uncorking it as he spoke: "Well, Rocketeers, a short life and a merry one. I never did give a damn for riding in these tin cans." The tension broke, they were all smiling, and saying they'd walk into the base camp with some kind of a Venusian female under each arm for the edification of Officers' Mess.

Leadon doubt of his own untried abilities and nerve lay icy in Hague's innards, and he left after one drink. The others streamed from the brightly lighted hatch a moment later. The Commander made a short speech to the entire party. Then Navigator Clark, a smiling, wiry little man, marched out of the clearing with his advance guard. Their voices muffled suddenly as they vanished down a forest corridor that lay gloomy between giant tree holes.

Commander Devlin slapped Hague cheerfully on the shoulder as he moved past; and the second section, spruce and trim in blue-black uniforms, with silver piping, followed him. Crewmen Didrickson and Davis followed with rifles and sagging bandoliers of explosive bullets crossing their chests; and then Arndt, the lean craggy geologist, his arm in a sling, and marching beside him was rotupd, be-

goggled Gault, the botanist. The little whippet tank clattered by next with Technician Whittaker grinning down at Hague from the turret.

"It pains me somethin' awful to see you walkin' when I'm ridin'," Whittaker piped over the whippet's clanking growl.

Hague grinned back, then pinched his nose between two fingers in the ageless dumb show of disgust, pointed at the tank, and shook his head sadly. The two carts the whippet towed swayed by, and the rest of the column followed; Bachmann, the doctor and Sewell, his beefy crotchety assistant; The two photographers staggered past under high-piled equipment packs, and Hague wondered how long they would keep all of it. Lenkranz, Johnston, Harker, Szachek, Hirooka, Ellis—each carried a pack full of equipment. The rest filed by until finally Swenson, the big Swede technician, passed and the clearing was empty.

Hague turned to look over his own party. In his mind's eye bobbed the neatly typed "Equipment, march order, light field artillery" lists he'd memorized along with what seemed a thousand other neatly typed lists at Gunnery School.

The list faded, and Hague watched his five-man gun-section lounge against their rifles, leaning slightly forward to ease the heavy webbing that supported their marching packs and the sectioned pneumatic gun.

"All right," Hague said brusquely. He dredged his brain desperately then for an encouraging speech, something that would show the crew he liked them, something the Commander might say, but he couldn't think of anything that sounded witty or rang with stirring words. He finally muttered a disgusted curse at his own blank-headedness, and said harshly, "All right, let's go."

The six men filed silently out of the clearing battered in the forest by Patrol Rocket One, and into damp gloom between gargantuan trunks that rose smoothly out of sight into darkness. Behind them a little rat-like animal scurried into the deserted slot of blasted trees, its beady black eyes studying curiously the silver ship that lay smashed and half-buried in the forest floor.

BASE Commander Chapman shuffled hopelessly through the thick sheaf of onion-skin papers, and sank back sighing. Ammunition reports, supply reports, medical reports, strength reports, reconnaissance reports, radio logs, radar logs, sonar logs, bulging dossiers of reports, files full of them, were there; and elsewhere in the ship efficient clerks were rapping out fresh, crisp battalions of new reports, neatly typed in triplicate on onion-skin paper.

He stared across his crowded desk at the quiet executive officer.

"Yes, Blake, it's a good picture of local conditions, but it isn't exploration. Until the Patrol Rocket gets in, we can send only this local stuff, and it just isn't enough."

Blake shrugged.

"It's all we've got. We can send parties out on foot from the base here, even if we do lose men, but the dope they'd get would still be on a localized area."

The Commander left his desk, and stared through a viewport at the plateau, and beyond that at the jungled belt fringing an endless expanse of rainforest lying sullenly quiet under the roof of racing grey clouds.

"The point is we've got to have more extensive material than this when we fire our robot-courier back to earth. This wonderful mountain of papers—what do they do, what do they tell? They describe beautifully the physical condition of this Base and its complement. They describe very well a ten mile area around the Base—but beyond that area they tell nothing. It's wonderful as far as it goes, but it only goes ten miles, and that isn't enough."

Blake eyed the snowy pile of papers abstractedly. Then he jumped up nervously as another bundle shot into a receiving tray from the pneumatic message tube. He began pacing the floor.

"Well, what can we do? Suppose we send the stuff we have here, get it micro-filmed and get it off—what then?"

The Commander swore bitterly, and turned to face his executive.

"What then?" he demanded savagely. "Are we going into that again? Why, the minute every other branch of the

services realize that we haven't got any kind of thorough preliminary report on this section of Venus, they'll start pounding the war drums. The battleship admirals and the bayonet generals will get to work and stir up enough public opinion to have the United States Rocket Service absorbed by other branches—the old, old game of military politics."

Blake nodded jerkily. "Yes, I know. We'd get the leftovers after the battleships had been built, or new infantry regiments activated, or something else. Anyway we wouldn't get enough money to carry on rocket research for space explorations."

"Exactly," the Commander cut in harshly. "These rockets would be grounded on earth. The generals or admirals would swear that the international situation demanded that they be kept there as weapons of defense; and that would be the end of our work."

"We've got to send back a good, thorough report, something to prove that the Rocket Service can do the job, and that it is worth the doing. And, until the patrol rocket gets back, we can't do it."

"Okay, Commander," Blake called as he went through the steel passage opening onto the mother ship's upper corridor, "I'll be holding the Courier Rocket until we get word."

SEVEN hours later it lightened a little, and day had come. Hague and the Sergeant had pulled the early morning guard shift, and began rolling the other four from their tiny individual tents.

Bormann staggered erect, yawned lustily, and swore that this was worse than spring maneuvers in Carolina.

"Shake it," Brian snarled savagely. "That whistle will blow in a minute."

When it did sound, they buckled each other into pack harness and swung off smartly, but groaning and muttering as the mud dragged at their heavy boots.

At midday, four hours later, there was no halt, and they marched steadily forward through steaming veils of oppressive heat, eating compressed ration as they walked. They splashed through a tiny creek that was solidly slimed, and hurried ahead when crawling things wriggled in the

green mass. Perspiration ran in streams from each face filing past on the trail, soaked through pack harness and packs; and wiry Hurd began to complain that his pack straps had cut through his shoulders as far as his navel. They stopped for a five minute break at 1400, when Hurd stopped fussing with his back straps and signalled for silence, though the other five had been too wrapped in their own discomfort to be talking.

"Listen! Do you hear it, Lieutenant? Like a horn?" Hurd's wizened rat face knotted in concentration. "Way off, like."

Hague listened blankly a moment, attempted an expression he fondly hoped was at once intelligent and reassuring, then said, "I don't hear anything. You may have taken too much fever dope, and it's causing a ringing in your ears."

"Naw," with heavy disgust. "Listen! There it goes again!"

"I heard it." That was Sergeant Brian's voice, hard and incisive, and Hague wished he sounded like that, or that he would have heard the sound before his second in command. All of the six were hunched forward, listening raptly, when the Lieutenant stood up.

"Yes, Hurd. Now I hear it."

The whistle blew then, and they moved forward. Hague noticed the Sergeant had taken a post at the rear of the little file, and watched their back trail warily as they marched.

"What do you think it was, sir?" Bucci inquired in the piping voice that sounded strange coming from his deep chest.

"The Lord knows," Hague answered, and wondered how many times he'd be using that phrase in the days to come. "Might have been some animal. They hadn't found any traces of intelligent life when we left the Base Camp."

BUT in the days that followed there was a new air of expectancy in the marchers, as if their suspicions had solidified into a waiting for attack. They'd been moving forward for several days.

Hague saw the pack before any of his men did, and thanked his guiding star that for once he had been a little more alert than his gun-section members.

The canvas carrier had been set neatly against one of the buttressing roots of a giant tree bole and, from the collecting bottles strapped in efficient rows outside, Hague deduced that it belonged to Bernstein, the entomologist. The gunnery officer halted and peered back into the gloom off the trail, called Bernstein's name; and when there was no reply moved cautiously into the hushed shadows with his carbine ready. He sensed that Sergeant Brian was catfooting behind him.

Then he saw the ghostly white bundle suspended six feet above the forest floor, and moved closer, calling Bernstein's name softly. The dim bundle vibrated gently, and Hague saw that it hung from a giant white lattice radiating wheel-like from the green gloom above. He raised his hand to touch the cocoon thing, noted it was shaped like a man well-wrapped in some woolly material; and on a sudden hunch pulled his belt knife and cut the fibers from what would be the head.

It was Bernstein suspended there, his snug, silken shroud bobbing gently in the dimness. His dark face was pallid in the gloom, sunken and flaccid of feature, as though the juices had been sucked from his corpse, leaving it a limp mummy.

The lattice's stick white strands vibrated—something moved across it overhead, and Hague flashed his lightpak up into the darkness. Crouched twenty feet above him, two giant legs delicately testing the strands of its lattice like web, Hague saw the spider, its bulbous furred body fully four feet across, the monster's myriad eyes glittering fire-like in the glow of Hague's lightpak, as it gathered the great legs slightly in the manner of a tarantula ready to leap.

Brian's sharp yell broke Hague from his frozen trance. He threw himself down as Brian's rifle crashed, and the giant arachnid was bathed in a blue-white flash of explosive light, its body tumbling down across the web onto Hague where he lay in the mud. The officer's hoarse yells rang insanely while he pulled himself clear of the dead spider-beast, but he forced himself to quiet at the sound of the Sergeant's cool voice.

"All clear, Lieutenant. It's dead."

"Okay, Brian. I'll be all right now." Hague's voice shook, and he cursed the weakness of his fear, forcing himself to walk calmly without a glance over his shoulder until they were back on the trail. He led the other four gunners back to the spider and Bernstein's body, as a grim object lesson, warned them to leave the trail only in pairs. They returned their weary footslogging pace down the muddy creek marked by Clark's crew. When miles had sweated by at the same steady pace, Hague could still feel in the men's stiff silence their horror of the thing Brian had killed.

HOURS, and then days, rolled past, drudging nightmares through which they plowed in mud and steamy heat, with punctually once every sixteen hours a breattaking, pounding torrent of rain. Giant drops turned the air into an aqueous mixture that was almost unbreathable, and smashed against their faces until the skin was numb. When the rain stopped abruptly the heat came back and water vapor rose steaming from the mud they walked through; but always they walked, shoving one aching foot ahead of the other through sucking black glue. Sometimes Bormann's harmonica would wheedle reedy airs, and they would sing and talk for a time, but mostly they swung forward in silence, faces drawn with fatigue and pale in the forest half light. Hague looked down at his hands, swollen, bloody with insect bites, and painfully stiff; and wondered if he'd be able to bend them round his ration pan at the evening halt.

Hague was somnambulating at the rear of his little column, listening to an ardent account from Bormann of what his girl might expect when he saw her again. Bucci, slowing occasionally to ease the pneumatic gun's barrel assembly across his shoulder, chimed in with an ecstatic description of his little Wilma. The two had been married just before the Expedition blasted Venusward out of an Arizona desert. Crosse was at the front end, and his voice came back nasally.

"Hey, Lieutenant, there's somebody sitting beside the trail."

"Okay. Halt." The Lieutenant swore

tiredly and trotted up to Crosse's side. "Where?"

"There. Against the big root."

Hague moved forward, carbine at ready, and knew without looking that Sergeant Brian was at his shoulder, cool and self-sufficient as always.

"Who's there?" the officer croaked.

"It's me, Bachmann."

Hague motioned his party forward, and they gathered in a small circle about the Doctor, seated calmly beside the trail, with his back against a root flange.

"What's the matter, Doc? Did you want to see us?"

"No. Sewell seems to think you're all healthy. Too bad the main party isn't as well off. Quite a bit of trouble with fever. And, Bernstein gone of course."

Hague nodded, and remembered he'd reported Bernstein's death to the Commander three nights before.

"How's the Commander?" he inquired.

The Doctor's cherubic face darkened. "Not good. He's not a young man, and this heat and walking are wrecking his heart. And he won't ride the tank."

"Well, let's go, Doc." It was Brian's voice, cutting like a knife into Hague's consciousness. The Doctor looked tired, and drawn.

"Go ahead, lads. I'm just going to sit here for a while." He looked up and smiled weakly at the astonished faces, but his eyes were bleakly determined.

"This is as far as I go. Snake bite. We've no anti-venom that seems to work. All they can do is to amputate, and we can't afford another sick man." He pulled a nylon wrapper from one leg that sprawled at an awkward angle beneath him. The bared flesh was black, swollen, and had a gangrenous smell. Young Crosse turned away, and Hague heard his retching.

"What did the Commander say?"

"He agreed this was best. I am going to die anyway."

"Will—will you be all right here? Don't you want us to wait with you?"

The Doctor's smile was weaker, and he mopped at the rivulets of perspiration streaking his mud-spattered face.

"No. I have an X-lethal dosage and a

hypodermic. I'll be fine here. Sewell knows what to do." His round face contorted, "Now, for God's sake, get on, and let me take that tablet. The pain is driving me crazy."

Hague gave a curt order, and they got under way. A little further on the trail, he turned to wave at Doctor Bachmann, but the little man was already invisible in forest shadows.

THE tenth day after the crash of Patrol Rocket One, unofficially known as the Ration Can, glimpses of skylight opened over the trail Clark's crew were marking; and Hague and his men found themselves suddenly in an opening where low, thick vines, and luxuriant, thick-leaved shrubs struggled viciously for life. Balistierri, the zoologist, slight wisp of a dark man always and almost a shadow now, stood wearily beside the trail waiting as they drew up. Their shade-blinded eyes picked out details in the open ground dimly. Hague groaned inwardly when he saw that this was a mere slit in the forest, and the great trees loomed again a hundred yards ahead. Balistierri seized Hague by the shoulder and pointed into the thick mat of green, smiling.

"Watch, all of you."

He blew a shrill blast on his whistle and waited, while Hague's gunners wondered and watched. There was a wild, silvery call, a threshing of wings, and two huge birds rose into the gold tinted air. They flapped up, locked their wings, and glided, soared, and wheeled over the earth-stained knot of men—two great white birds, with crests of fire-gold, plumage snowy save where it was dusted with rosy overtones. Their call was bell-like as they floated across the clearing in a golden haze of sunlight filtered through clouds.

"They're—they're like angels." It was Bormann, the tough young sentimentalist. "You've named them, soldier," Balistierri grinned. "I've been trying for a name; and that's the best I've heard. Bormann's angels they'll be. In Latin, of course."

Unfolding vistas of eternal zoological glory left Bormann speechless and red-faced. Sergeant Brian broke in.

"I guess they would have made those horn sounds. Right, Lieutenant?" His voice, dry and a little patronizing, suggested that this was a poor waste of valuable marching time.

"I wouldn't know, Sergeant," Hague answered, trying to keep dislike out of his voice, but the momentary thrill was broken and, with Balistierri beside him, Gunnery Officer Hague struck out on the trail that had been blasted and hacked through the clearing's wanton extravagance of greedy plant life.

As they crossed the clearing, Buccì tripped and sprawled full length in the mud. When he tried to get up, the vine over which he'd stumbled clutched with a woody tendril that wound snakelike tightly about his ankle; and, white faced, the rest of the men chopped him free of the serpentine thing with belt knives, bandaged the thorn wounds in his leg, and went on.

The clearing had one more secret to divulge, however. A movement in the forest edge caught Brian's eye and he motioned to Hague, who followed him questioningly as the Sergeant led him off trail. Brian pointed silently and Hague saw Didrickson, Sergeant in charge of Supplies, seated in the lemon-colored sunlight at the forest edge, an open food pack between his knees, from which he snatched things and swallowed them voraciously, feeding like a wild dog.

"Didrickson! Sergeant Didrickson!" the Lieutenant yelled. "What are you doing?"

The supply man stared back, and Hague knew from the man's face what had happened. He crouched warily, eyes wild with panic and jaw hanging foolishly slack. This was Didrickson, the steady, efficient man who'd sat at the chart table the night they began this march. He had been the only man Devlin thought competent and nerveless enough to handle the food. This was the same Didrickson, and madder now than a March hare, Hague concluded grimly. The enlisted man snatched up the food pack, staring at them in wild fear, and began to run back down the trail, back the way they'd come.

"Come back, Didrickson. We've got to have that food, you fool!"

The madman laughed crazily at the

sound of the officer's voice, glanced back for a moment, then spun and ran.

Sergeant Brian, as always, was ready. His rifle cracked, and the explosive missile blew the running man nearly in half. Sergeant Brian silently retrieved the food pack and brought it back to Hague.

"Do you want it here, Lieutenant, or shall I take it up to the main party?"

"We'll keep it here, Sergeant. Sewell can take it back tonight after our medical check." Hague's voice shook, and he wished savagely that he could have had the nerve to pass that swift death sentence. Didrickson's crime was dangerous to every member of the party, and the Sergeant had been right to shoot. But when the time came—when perhaps the Sergeant wasn't with him—would he, Hague, react swiftly and coolly as an officer should, he wondered despairingly?

"All right, lads, let's pull," he said, and the tight lipped gun crew filed again into the hushed, somber forest corridors.

II

COMMUNICATIONS TECH-
nician Harker took a deep pull at his mug of steaming coffee, blinked his eyes hard at the swimming dials before him, and lit a cigarette. Odysseus warning center was never quiet, even now in the graveyard watch when all other lights were turned low through the great ship's hull. Here in the neat grey room, murmuring, softly-clicking signal equipment was banked against every wall in a gleaming array of dials and meters, heavy power leads, black panels, and intricate sheafs of colored wire. The sonar kept up a sleepy drone, and radar scopes glowed fitfully with interference patterns, and the warning buzzer beeped softly as the radar echoed back to its receivers the rumor of strange planetary forces that radar hadn't been built to filter through. What made the interference, base technicians couldn't tell, but it practically paralyzed radio communication on all bands, and blanketed out even radar warnings.

The cigarette burned his finger tips, and Harker jerked awake and tried to concentrate on the letter he was writing home.

It would be microfilmed, and go or the next courier rocket. A movement at the Warnings Room door, brought Harker's head up, and he saw Commander Chapman, lean and grey, standing there.

"Good evening, sir. Come on in. I've got coffee on." The Communications Technician took a pot from the glow heater at his elbow, and set out another cup.

The Commander smiled tiredly, pulled out a stubby metal stool, and sat across the low table from Harker, sipping the scalding coffee cautiously. He looked up after a moment.

"What's the good word, Harker? Picked up anything?"

Harker ran his fingers through his mop of black hair, and grimaced.

"Not a squeak, sir. No radio, no radar. Of course, the interference may be blanketing those. Creates a lot of false signals, too, on the radar screens. But we can't even pick 'em up with long-range sonar. That should get through. We're pretty sure they crashed, all right."

"How about our signals, Harker? Do you think we're getting through to them?"

Harker leaned back expansively, happy to expound his specialty.

"Well, we've been sending radio signals every hour on the hour, and radio voice messages every hour on the half hour. We're sending a continuous sonar beam for their direction-finder. That's about all we can do. As for their picking it up, assuming the rocket has crashed and been totally knocked out, they still have a radio in the whippet tank. It's a transceiver. And they have a portable sonar set, one of those little twenty-pound armored detection units. They'll use it as a direction finder."

Chapman swirled the coffee around in the bottom of his cup and stared thoughtfully into it.

"If they can get sonar, why can't we send them messages down the sonar beam? You know, flick it on and off in Morse code?"

"It won't work with a small detector like they have, sir. With our big set here, we could send them a message, but that outfit they have might burn out. It has a

limited sealed motor supply that must break down an initial current resistance on the grids before the rectifiers can convert it to audible sound. With the set operating continuously, power drainage is small, but begin changing your signal beam and the power has to break down the grid resistance several hundred times for every short signal sent. It would burn out their set in a matter of hours.

"It works like a slide trombone, sort of. Run your slide way out, and you get a slowly vibrating column of air, and that is heard as a low note, only on sonar it would be a short note. Run your slide way up, and the vibrations are progressively faster and higher in pitch. The sonar set, at peak, is vibrating so rapidly that it's almost static, and the power flow is actually continuous. But, starting and stopping the set continuously, the vibrators never have a chance to reach a normal peak, and the power flow is broken at each vibration in the receiver—and a few hours later your sonar receptor is a hunk of junk."

"All right, Harker. Your discussion is vague, but I get the general idea that my suggestion wasn't too hot. Well, have whoever is on duty call me if any signals come through." The Commander set down his cup, said goodnight, and moved off down the hushed corridor. Harker returned to his letter and a chewed stub of pencil, while he scowled in a fevered agony of composition. It was a letter to his girl, and it had to be good.

NIGHT had begun to fall over the forest roof, and stole thickening down the muddy cathedral aisles of great trees, and Hague listened hopefully for the halt signal from the whippet tank, which should come soon. He was worried about Bucci who was laughing and talking volubly, and the officer decided he must have a touch of fever. The dark, muscular gunner kept talking about his young wife in what was almost a babble. Once he staggered and nearly fell, until Hurd took the pneumatic gun barrel assembly and carried it on his own shoulders. They were all listening expectantly for the tank's klaxon, when a brassy scream ripped the

evening to echoing shreds and a flurry of shots broke out ahead.

The scream came again, metallic and shrill as a locomotive gone amok; yells, explosive-bullet reports, and the sound of hammering blows drifted back.

"Take over, Brian," Hague snapped. "Crosse, Hurd—let's go!"

The three men ran at a stagger through the dragging mud around a turn in the trail, and dropped the pneumatic gun swiftly into place, Hurd at firing position, Crosse on the charger, and Hague prone in the slime snapping an ammunition belt into the loader.

Two emergency flares some one had thrown lit the trail ahead in a garish photographic fantasy of bright, white light and ink-black shadow, a scene out of *Inferno*. A cart lay on its side, men were running clear, the whippet tank lay squirming on its side, and above it towered the screaming thing. A lizard, or dinosaur, rearing up thirty feet, scaly grey, a man clutched in its two hand-like claws, while its armored tail smashed and smashed at the tank with pile-driver blows. Explosive bullets cracked around the thing's chest in blue white flares of light, but it continued to rip at the man twisting pygmy-like in its claws—white teeth glinting like sabers as its blindly malevolent screams went on.

"On target," Hurd's voice came strained and low.

"Charge on," from Crosse.

"Let her go!" Hague yelled, and fed APX cartridges as the gun coughed a burst of armor-piercing, explosive shells into the rearing beast. Hague saw the tank turret swing up as Whittaker tried to get his gun in action, but a slashing slap of the monster's tail spun it back brokenly. The cluster of pneumatic shells hit then and burst within that body, and the great grey-skinned trunk was hurled off the trail, the head slapping against a tree trunk on the other side as the reptile was halved.

"Good shooting, Crosse," Hague grunted. "Get back with Brian. Keep the gun ready. That thing might have a mate." He ran toward the main party, and into the glare of the two flares.

"Where's Devlin?"

Clark, the navigation officer, was standing with a small huddle of men near the smashed supply cart.

"Here, Hague," he called. His eyes were sunken, his face older in the days since Hague had last seen him. "Devlin's dead, smashed between the cart and a tree trunk. We've lost two men, Commander Devlin and Ellis, the soils man. He's the one it was eating." He grimaced.

"That leaves twenty-three of us?" Hague inquired, and tried to sound casual.

"That's right. You'll continue to cover the rear. Those horn sounds you reported had Devlin worried about an attack from your direction. I'll be with the tank."

Sergeant Brian was stoically heating ration stew over the cook unit when Hague returned, while the crew sat in a close circle, alternately eying nervously the forest at their backs, and the savory steam that rose from Brian's mixture. There wasn't much for each of them, but it was hot and highly nutritious, and after a cigarette and coffee they would feel comfort for a while.

Crosse, seated on the grey metal charger tube he'd carried all day, fingered the helmet in his lap, and looked inquiringly at the Lieutenant.

"Well, sir, anybody hurt? Was the tank smashed?"

Hague squatted in the circle, sniffed the stew with loud enthusiasm, and looked about the circle.

"Commander Devlin's dead, and Ellis. One supply cart smashed, but the tank'll be all right. The lizard charged the tank. Balistierri thinks it was the lizard's mating season, and he figured the tank was another male and he tried to fight it. Then he stayed—to—lunch and we got him. Lieutenant Clark is in command now."

The orange glow of Brian's cook unit painted queer shadows on the strained faces around him, and Hague tried to brighten them up.

"Will you favor us with one of your inimitable harmonica arrangements, Maestro Bormann?"

"I can't right now. I'm bandaging Helen's wing." He held out something in the palm of his hand, and the heater's

glow glittered on liquid black eyes. "She's like a little bird, but without her feathers. See?" He placed the warm lump in Hague's hand. "For wings, she's just got skin, like a bat, except she's built like a bird."

"You ought to show this to Balistierri, and maybe he'll name this for you too."

Bormann's homely face creased into a grin. "I did, sir. At the noon halt when I found it. It's named after my girl. 'Bormann's Helen', only in Latin. Helen's got a broken wing."

AS THEY ATE, they heard the horn note again. Bucci's black eyes were feverishly bright, his skin hot and dry, and the vine scratches on his leg badly inflamed; and when the rest began to sing he was quiet. The reedy song of Bormann's harmonica piped down the quiet forest passages, and echoed back from the great trees; and somewhere, as Hague dozed off in his little tent, he heard the horn note again, sandwiched into mouth organ melody.

Two days of slogging through the slimy green mud, and at a noon halt Sewell brought back word to be careful, that a man had failed to report at roll call that morning. The gun crew divided Bucci's equipment between them, and he limped in the middle of the file on crutches fashioned from ration cart wreckage. Crosse, who'd been glancing off continually, like a wizened, curious rat, flung up his arm in a silent signal to halt, and Hague moved in to investigate, the ever present Brian moving carefully and with jungle beast's silent poise just behind him. Crumpled like a sack of damp laundry, in the murk of two root buttresses, lay Romano, one of the two photographers. His Hasselblad camera lay beneath his body crushing a small plant he must have been photographing.

From the back of Romano's neck protruded a gleaming nine-inch arrow shaft, a lovely thing of gleaming bronze-like metal, delicately thin of shaft and with fragile hammered bronze vanes. Brian moved up behind Hague, bent over the body and cut the arrow free.

They examined the thing, and when

Brian spoke Hague was surprised that this time even the rock-steady Sergeant spoke in a hushed voice, the kind boys use when they walk by a graveyard at night and don't wish to attract unwelcome attention.

"Looks like it came from a blowgun, Lieutenant. See the plug at the back. It must be poisoned; it's not big enough to kill him otherwise."

Hague grunted assent, and the two moved back trailward.

"Brian, take over. Crosse, come on. We'll report this to Clark. Remember, from now on wear your body armor and go in pairs when you leave the trail. Get Bucci's plates on to him."

Bormann and Hurd set down their loads, and were buckling the weakly protesting Bucci into his chest and back plates, as Hague left them.

COMMANDER Chapman stared at the circle of faces. His section commanders lounged about his tiny square office. "Well, then, what are their chances?"

Bjornson, executive for the technical section, stared at Chapman levelly.

"I can vouch for Devlin. He's not precisely a rule-book officer, but that's why I recommended him for this expedition. He's at his best in an unusual situation, one where he has to depend on his own wits. He'll bring them through."

Artilleryman Branch spoke in turn. "I don't know about Hague. He's young, untried. Seemed a little unsure. He might grow panicky and be useless. I sent him because there was no one else, unless I went myself."

The Commander cleared his throat brusquely. "I know you wanted to go, Branch, but we can't send out our executive officers. Not yet, anyway. What about Clark? Could he take over Devlin's job?"

"Clark can handle it," Captain Rindell of the Science Section, was saying. "He likes to follow the rule book, but he's sturdy stuff. He'll bring them through if something happens to Devlin."

"Hm—hm—that leaves Hague as the one questionable link in their chain of command. Young man, untried. Of course,

he's only the junior officer. There's no use stewing over this; but I'll tell you frankly, that if those men can't get their records through to us before we send the next courier rocket to earth, I think the U.S. Rocket Service is finished. This attempt will be chalked up as a failure. The project will be abandoned entirely, and we'll be ordered back to earth to serve as a fighter arm there."

Bjornson peered from the space-port window and looked out over the cinder-packed parade a hundred feet below. "What makes you so sure the Rocket Service is in immediate danger of being scrapped?"

"The last courier rocket contained a confidential memo from Secretary Dougherty. There is considerable war talk, and the other Service Arms are plunging for larger armaments. They want their appropriations of money and stock pile materials expanded at our expense. We've got to show that we are doing a good job, show the Government a concrete return in the form of adequate reports on the surface of Venus, and its soils and raw materials."

"What about the 'copters!" Rindell inquired. "They brought in some good stuff for the reports."

"Yes, but with a crew of only four men, they can't do enough."

Branch cut in dryly. "About all I can see is to look hopeful. The Rocket would have exhausted its fuel long ago. It's been over ten weeks since they left Base."

"Assuming they're marching overland, God forbid, they'll have only sonar and radio, right?" Bjornson was saying. "Why not keep our klaxon going? It's a pretty faint hope, but we'll have to try everything. My section is keeping the listeners manned continually, we've got a sonar beam out, radio messages every thirty minutes, and with the klaxon we're doing all we can. I doubt if anything living could approach within a twenty five mile range without hearing that klaxon, or without us hearing them with the listeners."

"All right." Commander Chapman stared hopelessly at a fresh batch of reports burdening his desk. "Send out ground parties within the ten mile limit, but remember we can't afford to lose men.



It gathered the great legs slightly . . . ready to leap.

When the 'copters' are back in, send them both West." West meant merely in a direction west from Meridian 0, as the mother rocket's landing place had been designated. "They can't do much searching over that rainforest, but it's a try. They might pick up a radio message."

Chapman returned grumpily to his reports, and the others filed out.

III

AT NIGHT, ON GUARD, HAGUE saw a thousand horrors peopling the Stygian forest murk; but when he flashed his lightpak into darkness there was nothing. He wondered how long he could stand the waiting, when he would crack as Supply Sergeant Didrickson had, and

his comrades would blast him down with explosive bullets. He should be like Brian, hard and sure, and always doing the right thing, he decided. He'd come out of OCS Gunnery School, trained briefly in the newly-formed U.S. Rocket Service. Then the expedition to Venus—it was a fifty-fifty chance they said, and out of all the volunteers he'd been picked. And when the first expedition was ready to blast off from the Base Camp on Venus, he'd been picked again. Why, he cursed despairingly? Sure, he wanted to come, but how could his commanders have had faith in him, when he didn't know himself if he could continue to hold out.

Sounds on the trail sent his carbine automatically to ready, and he called a strained, "Halt."

"Okay, Hague. It's Clark and Arndt."

The wiry little navigation officer, and lean, scraggy Geologist Arndt, the latter's arm still in a sling, came into the glow of Hague's lightpak.

"Any more horns or arrows?" Clark's voice sounded tight, and repressed; Hague reflected that perhaps the strain was getting him too.

"No, but Bucci is getting worse. Can't you carry him on the cart?"

"Hague, I've told you twenty times. That cart is full and breaking down now. Get it through your head that it's no longer individual men we can think of now, but the entire party. If they can't march, they must be left, or all of us may die!" His voice was savage, and when he tried to light a cigarette his hand shook. "All right. It's murder, and I don't like it any better than you do."

"How are we doing? What's the over-all picture!" Both of the officers tried to smile a little at the memory of that pompous little phrase, favorite of a windbag they'd served under.

"Not good. Twenty-two of us now."

"Hirooka thinks we may be within radio range of Base soon," he continued more hopefully. "With this interference, we can't tell, though."

They talked a little longer, Arndt gave the gunnery officer a food-and-medical supply packet, and Hague's visitors became two bobbing glows of light that

vanished down the trail.

A soul crushing weight of days passed while they strained forward through mud and green gloom, like men walking on a forest sea bottom. Then it was a cool dawn, and a tugging at his boot awoke the Lieutenant. Hurd, his face a strained mask, was peering into the officer's small shelter tent and jerking at his leg.

"Get awake, Lieutenant. I think they're here."

Hague struggled hard to blink off the exhausted sleep he'd been in.

"Listen, Lieutenant, one of them horns has been blowing. It's right here. Between us and the main party."

"Okay." Hague rolled swiftly from the tent as Hurd awoke the men. Hague moved swiftly to each.

"Brian, you handle the gun. Bucci, loader. Crosse, charger. Bormann, cover our right; Hurd the left. I'll watch the trail ahead."

Brian and Crosse worked swiftly and quietly with the lethal efficiency that had made them crack gunners at Fort Fisher, North Carolina. Bucci lay motionless at the ammunition box, but his eyes were bright, and he didn't seem to mind his feverish, swollen leg. The Sergeant and Crosse slewed the pneumatic gun to cover their back trail, and fell into position beside the gleaming grey tube. Hague, Bormann and Hurd moved quickly at striking tents and rolling packs, their rifles ready at hand.

Hague had forgotten his fears and the self-doubt, the feeling that he had no business ordering men like Sergeant Brian, and Hurd and Bormann. They were swallowed in intense expectancy as he lay watching the dawn fog that obscured like thick smoke the trail that led to Clark's party and the whippet tank.

He peered back over his shoulder for a moment. Brian, Bucci, and Crosse, mud-stained backs toward him, were checking the gun and murmuring soft comments. Bormann looked at the officer, grinned tightly, and pointed at Helen perched on his shoulder. His lips carefully framed the words, "Be a pushover, Helen brings luck."

The little bird peered up into Bormann's

old-young face, and Hague, trying to grin back, hoped he looked confident. Hurd lay on the other side of the trail, his back to Bormann, peering over his rifle barrel, bearded jaws rhythmically working a cud of tobacco he'd salvaged somewhere, and Hague suddenly thought he must have been saving it for the finish.

Hague looked back into the green light beginning to penetrate the trail fog, changing it into a glowing mass—then thought he saw a movement. Up the trail, the whippet tank's motor caught with a roar, and he heard Whittaker traversing the battered tank's turret. The turret gun boomed flatly, and a shell burst somewhere in the forest darkness to Hague's right.

Then there was a gobbling yell and gray man-like figures poured out onto the trail. Hague set his sights on them, the black sight-blade silhouetting sharply in the glowing fog. He set them on a running figure, and squeezed his trigger, then again, and again, as new targets came. Sharp reports ran crackling among the great trees. Sharp screams came, and a whistling sound overhead that he knew were blowgun arrows. The pneumatic gun sputtered behind him, and Bormann's and Hurd's rifles thudded in the growing roar.

Blue flashes and explosive bullets made fantastic flares back in the forest shadows; and suddenly a knot of man-shapes were running toward him through the fog. Hague picked out one in the glowing mist, fired, another, fired. Gobbling yells were around him, and he shot toward them through the fog, at point-blank range. A thing rose up beside him, and Hague yelled with murderous fury, and drove his belt-knife up into grey leather skin. Something burned his shoulder as he rolled aside and fired at the dark form standing over him with a poised, barbed spear. The blue-white flash was blinding, and he cursed and leaped up.

There was nothing more. Scattered shots, and the forest lay quiet again. After that shot at point-blank range, Hague's vision had blacked out.

"Any one else need first aid?" he called, and tried to keep his voice firm. When there was silence, he said, "Hurd, lead me to the tank."

He heard the rat-faced man choke, "My God, he's blind."

"Just flash blindness, Hurd. Only temporary." Hague kept his face stiff, and hoped frantically that he was right, that it was just temporary blindness, temporary optic shock.

Sergeant Brian's icy voice cut in. "Gun's all right, Lieutenant. Nobody hurt. We fired twenty eight rounds of H.E. No A.P.X. Get going with him, Hurd."

He felt Hurd's tug at his elbow, and they made their way up the trail.

"What do they look like, Hurd?"

"These men-things? They're grey, about my size, skin looks like leather, and their heads are flattish. Eyes on the side of their heads, like a lizard. Not a stitch of clothes. Just a belt with a knife and arrow holder. And they got webbed claws for feet. They're ugly-looking things, sir. Here's the tank."

Clark's voice came, hard and clear. "That you, Hague?" Silence for a moment. "What's wrong? You're not blinded?"

Sewell had dropped his irascibility, and his voice was steady and kindly.

"Just flash blindness, isn't it, sir? This salve will fix you up. You've got a cut on your shoulder. I'll take care of that too."

"How are your men, Hague?" Clark sounded as though he were standing beside Hague.

"Not a scratch. We're ready to march."

"Five hurt here, three with the advance party, and two at the tank. We got 'em good, though. They hit the trail between our units and got fire from both sides. Must be twenty of them dead."

Hague grimaced at the sting of something Sewell had squeezed into his eyes. "Who was hurt?"

"Arndt, the geologist; his buddy, Galut, the botanist; lab technician Harker, Crewman Harker, and Szachek, the meteorologist man. How's your pneumatic ammunition?"

"We fired twenty-eight rounds of H.E."

Cartographer Hirooka's voice burst in excitedly.

"That gun crew of yours! Your gun crew got twenty-one of these—these lizard

men. A bunch came up our back trail, and the pneumatic cut them to pieces."

"Good going, Hague. We'll leave you extended back there. I'm pulling in the advance party, and there'll be just two groups. We'll be at point, and you continue at afterguard." Clark was silent for a moment, then his voice came bitterly, "We're down to seventeen men, you know."

He cursed, and Hague heard the wiry little navigator slosh away through the mud and begin shouting orders. He and Hurd started back with Whittaker and Sergeant Sample yelling wild instructions from the tank as to what the rear guard might do with the next batch of lizard-men who came sneaking up.

Hague's vision was clearing, and he saw Balistierri and the photographer Whitcomb through a milky haze, measuring, photographing, and even dissecting several of the lizard-men. The back trail, swept by pneumatic gunfire was a wreck of wood splinters and smashed trees, smashed bodies, and cratered earth.

They broke down the gun, harnessed the equipment, and swung off at the sound of Clark's whistle. Bucci had to be supported between two of the others, and they took turnabout at the job, sloshing through the water and mud, with Bucci's one swollen leg dragging uselessly between them. It was punishing work as the heat veils shimmered and thickened, but no one seemed to consider leaving him behind, Hague noticed; and he determined to say nothing about Clark's orders that the sick must be abandoned.

Days and nights flashed by in a dreary monotony of mud, heat, insects and thinning rations. Then one morning the giant trees began to thin, and they passed from rainforest into jungle.

The change was too late for Bucci. They carved a neat marker beside the trail, and set the dead youth's helmet atop it. Lieutenant Hague carried ahead a smudged letter in his shirt, with instructions to forward it to Wilma, the gunner's young wife.

Hague and his four gunners followed the rattling whippet tank's trail higher, the jungle fell behind, and their protesting

legs carried them over the rim of a high, cloudswept plateau, that swept on to the limit of vision on both sides and ahead.

THE CITY'S black walls squatted secretively; foursquare, black, glassy walls with a blocky tower set sturdily at each of the four corners, enclosing what appeared to be a square mile of low buildings. Grey fog whipped coldly across the flat bleakness and rustled through dark grass.

Balistierri, plodding beside Hague at the rear, stared at it warily, muttering, "And Childe Roland to the dark tower came."

Sampler's tank ground along the base of the twelve-foot wall, turned at a sharp right angle, and the party filed through a square cut opening that once had been a gate. The black city looked tenantless. There was dark-hued grass growing in the misted streets and squares, and across the lintels of cube-shaped, neatly aligned dwellings, fashioned of thick, black blocks. Hague could hear nothing but whipping wind, the tank's clatter, and the quiet clink of equipment as men shuffled ahead through the knee-high grass, peering watchfully into dark doorways.

Clark's whistle shrilled, the tank motor died, and they waited.

"Hague, come ahead."

The gunnery officer nodded at Sergeant Brian, and walked swiftly to Clark, who was leaning against the tank's mudcaked side.

"Sampler says we've got to make repairs on the tank. We'll shelter here. Set your gun on a roof top commanding the street—or, better yet, set it on the wall. I'll want two of your gunners to go hunting food animals."

"What do you think this place is, Bob?"

"Beats me," and the navigator's wind-burned face twisted in a perplexed expression. "Lenkranz knows more about metals, but he thinks this stone is volcanic, like obsidian. Those lizard-men couldn't have built it."

"We passed some kind of bas-relief or murals inside the gate."

"Whitcomb is going to photograph them. Blake, Lenkranz, Johnston, and Hirooka are going to explore the place.

Your two gunners, and Crewman Swenson and Balistierri will form the two hunting parties."

For five days, Hague and Crosse walked over the sullen plateau beneath scudding, leaden clouds, hunting little lizards that resembled dinosaurs and ran in coveys like grey chickens. The meat was good, and Sewell dropped his role of medical technician to achieve glowing accolades as an expert cook. Balistierri was in a zoologist's paradise, and he hunted over the windy plain with Swenson, the big white-haired Swede, for ten and twelve hours at a stretch. Balistierri would sit in the cook's unit glow at night, his thin face ecstatic as he described the weird life forms he and Swenson had tracked down during the day; or alternately he'd bemoan the necessity of eating what were to him priceless zoological specimens.

Whittaker and Sampler hammered in the recalcitrant tank's bowels and shouted ribald remarks to any one nearby, until they emerged the third day, grease-stained and perspiring, to announce that "She's ready to roll her g— d— cleats off."

Whittaker had been nursing the tank's radio transceiver beside the forward hatch this grey afternoon, when his wild yell brought Hague erect. The officer carefully handed Bermann's skin bird back to the gunner, swung down from the city wall's edge, and ran to Whittaker's side. Clark was already there when Hague reached the tank.

"Listen! I've got 'em!" Whittaker yelled and extended the crackling earphones to Clark.

A tinny voice penetrated the interference.

"Base . . . Peter One . . . Do you hear . . . to George Easy Peter One . . . hear me . . . out."

Whittaker snapped on his throat microphone.

"George Easy Peter One To Base. George Easy Peter One To Base. We hear you. We hear you. Rocket crashed. Rocket crashed. Returning overland. Returning overland. Present strength sixteen men. Can you drop us supplies? Can you drop us supplies?"

The earphones sputtered, but no more

voices came through. Clark's excited face fell into tired lines.

"We've lost them. Keep trying, Whittaker. Hague, we'll march-order tomorrow at dawn. You'll take the rear again."

GREY, windy dawnlight brought them out to the sound of Clark's call. Strapping on equipment and plates, they assembled around the tank. They were rested, and full fed.

"Walk, you poor devils," Whittaker was yelling from his tank turret. "And, if you get tired, run awhile," he snorted, grinning heartlessly, as he leaned back in pretended luxury against the gunner's seat, a thinly padded metal strip.

Balistierri and the blond Swenson shouldered their rifles and shuffled out. They would move well in advance as scouts.

"I wouldn't ride in that armored alarm-clock if it had a built-in harem," Hurd was screaming at Whittaker, and hurled a well-placed mudball at the tankman's head as the tank motor caught, and the metal vehicle lumbered ahead toward the gate, with Whittaker sneering, but with most of his head safely below the turret rim. Beside it marched Clark, his ragged uniform carefully scraped clean of mud, and with him Lenkranz, the metals man. Both carried rifles and wore half empty bandoliers of blast cartridges.

The supply cart jerked behind the tank, and behind it filed Whitcomb with his cameras; Sewell, the big, laconic medical technician; Johnston; cartographer Hirooka perusing absordedly the clip board that held his strip map; Blake, the lean and spectacled bacteriologist, brought up the rear. Hague waited until they had disappeared through the gate cut sharply in the city's black wall, then he turned to his gun crew.

Sergeant Brian, saturnine as always, swung past carrying the pneumatic barrel assembly, Crosse with the charger a pace behind. Next, Bormann, whispering to Helen who rode his shoulder piping throaty calls. Last came Hurd, swaggering past with jaws grinding steadily at that mysterious cud. Hague cast a glance over his shoulder at the deserted street of

black cubes, wondered at the dank loneliness of the place, and followed Hurd.

The hours wore on as they swung across dark grass, through damp tendrils of cloud, and faced into whipping, cold wind, eyes narrowed against its sting. Helen, squawking unhappily, crawled inside Bormann's shirt and rode with just her brown bird-head protruding.

"Look at the big hole, Lieutenant," Hurd called above the wind.

Hurd had dropped behind, and Hague called a halt to investigate Hurd's find, but as he hiked rapidly back, the wiry little man yelled and pitched out of sight. Brian came running, and he and Hague peered over the edge of a funnel shaped pit, from which Hurd was trying to crawl. Each time he'd get a third of the way up the eighteen-foot slope, gravelly soil would slide and he'd again be carried to the bottom.

"Throw me a line."

Brian pulled a hank of nylon line from his belt, shook out the snarls, and tossed an end into Hurd's clawing hands. Hague and the Sergeant anchored themselves to the upper end and were preparing to haul, when Hague saw something move in the gravel beneath Hurd's feet, at the funnel bottom, and saw a giant pincers emerging from loose, black gravel.

"Hurd look out!" he screamed.

The little man, white-faced, threw himself aside as a giant beetle head erupted through the funnel bottom. The great pincers jaws fastened around Hurd's waist as he struggled frantically up the pit's side. He began screaming when the beetle monster dragged him relentlessly down, his distorted face flung up at them appealingly. Hague snatched at his rifle and brought it up. When the gun cracked, the pincer's tightened on Hurd's middle, and the little man was snipped in half. The blue-white flash and report of the explosive bullet blended with Hurd's choked yells, the beetle rolled over on its back and the two bodies lay entangled at the pit bottom. Brian and Hague looked at each other in silent, blanched horror, then turned from the pit's edge and loped back to the others.

Bormann and Crosse peered fearfully

across the windwhipped grass, and inquired in shouts what Hurd was doing.

"He's dead, gone," Hague yelled savagely over the wind's whine. "Keep moving. We can't do anything. Keep going."

IV

AT 1630 HOURS COMMANDER Technician Harker slipped on the earset, threw over a transmitting switch, and monotoned the routine verbal message.

"Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me George Easy Peter One . . . reply please . . . reply please." Nothing came from his earphones, but bursts of crackling interference, until he tried the copters next, and "George Easy Peter Two" and "George Easy Peter Three" reported in. They were operating near the base.

He tried "One" again, just in case.

"Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me . . . Do you hear me . . . out".

A scratching whisper resolved over the interference. Harker's face wore a stunned look, but he quickly flung over a second switch and the scratching voice blared over the mother ship's entire address system. Men dropped their work throughout the great hull, and clustered around the speakers.

"George One . . . Base . . . hear you . . . rocket crashed . . . overland . . . present strength . . . supplies . . . drop supplies."

Interference surged back and drowned the whispering voice, while through Odysseus' hull a ragged cheer grew and gathered volume. Harker shut off the address system and strained over his crackling earphones, but nothing more came in response to his radio calls.

He glanced up and found the Warning Room jammed with technicians, science section members, officers, men in laboratory smocks, or greasy overalls, or spotless Rocket Service uniforms, watching intently his own strained face as he tried to get through. Commander Chapman

looked haggard, and Harker remembered that some one had once said that Chapman's young sister was the wife of the medical technician who'd gone out with Patrol Rocket One.

Harker finally pulled off the earphones reluctantly and set them on the table before him. "That's all. You heard everything they said over the P.A. system. Nothing more is coming through."

NIGHT came, another day, night again, and they came finally to the plateau's end, and stood staring from a windy escarpment across an endless roof of rain-forest far below, grey green under the continuous roof of lead-colored clouds. Hague, standing back a little, watched them. A thin line of ragged men along the rim peering mournfully out across that endless expanse for a gleam that might be the distant hull of Odysseus, the mother ship. A damp wind fluttered their rags and plastered them against gaunt bodies.

Clark and Sampler were conferring in shouts.

"Will the tank make it down this grade?" Clark wanted to know.

For once, Sergeant Sampler's mobile, merry face was grim.

"I don't know, but we'll sure try. Be ready to cut that cart loose if the tank starts to slip."

Drag ropes were fastened to the cart, a man stationed at the tank hitch, and Sampler sent his tank lurching forward over the edge, and it slanted down at a sharp angle. Hague, holding a drag rope, set his heels and allowed the tank's weight to pull him forward over the rim; and the tank, cart, and muddy figures hanging to drag ropes began descending the steep gradient. Bormann, just ahead of the Lieutenant, strained back at the rope and turned a tight face over his shoulder.

"She's slipping faster!"

The tank was picking up speed, and Hague heard the clash of gears as Sampler tried to fight the downward pull of gravity. Gears ground, and Sampler forced the whippet straight again, but the downward slide was increasing. Hague was flattened under Bormann, heels digging, and behind

him he could hear Sergeant Brian cursing, struggling to keep flat against the downward pull.

The tank careened sideways again, slipped, and Whittaker's white face popped from her turret.

"She's going," he screamed.

A drag rope parted. Clark sprang like a madman between tank and cart, and cut the hitch. The tank, with no longer sufficient restraining weight, tipped with slow majesty outward, then rolled out and down, bouncing, smashing as if in a slow motion film, shedding parts at each crushing contact. It looked like a toy below them, still rolling and gathering speed, when Hague saw Whittaker's body fly free, a tiny ragdoll at that distance, and the tank was lost to view when it bounced off a ledge and went floating down through space.

Clark signalled them forward, and they inched the supply cart downward on the drag ropes, legs trembling with strain, and their nerves twitching at the memory of Whittaker's chalky face peering from the falling turret. It was eight hours before they reached the bottom, reeling with exhaustion, set a guard, and tumbled into their shelter tents. Outside, Hague could hear Clark pacing restlessly, trying to assure himself that he'd been right to cut the tank free, that there'd been no chance to save Whittaker and Sampler when the tank began to slide.

Hague lay in his little tent listening to the footsteps splash past in muddy Venusian soil, and was thankful that he hadn't had to make the decision. He'd been saving three cigarettes in an oilskin packet, and he drew one carefully from the wrapping now, lit it, and inhaled deeply. Could he have done what Clark did—break that hitch? He still didn't know when he took a last lung-filling pull at the tiny stub of cigarette and crushed it out carefully.

As dawn filtered through the cloud layer, they were rolling shelter tents and buckling on equipment. Clark's face was a worn mask when he talked with Hague, and his fingers shook over his pack buckles.

"There are thirteen of us. Six men will pull the supply cart, and six guard,

in four hour shifts. You and I will alternate command at guard."

He was silent for a moment, then watched Hague's face intently as he spoke again.

"It'll be a first grade miracle if any of us get through. Hague, you—you know I had to cut that tank free." His voice rose nervously. "You know that! You're an officer."

"Yeah, I guess you did." Hague couldn't say it any better, and he turned away and fussed busily with the bars holding the portable Sonar detection unit to the supply cart.

They moved off with Hague leaning into harness pulling the supply cart bumpily ahead. Clark stumbled jerkily at the head, with Blake, a lean, silent ghost beside him, rifle in hand. The cart came next with Hague, Bormann, Sergeant Brian, Crosse, Lenkranz and Sewell leaning in single file against its weight. At the rear marched photographer Whitcomb, Hirooka with his maps, and Balistierra, each carrying a rifle. The big Swede Swenson was last in line, peering warily back into the rainforest shadows. The thirteen men wound Indian file from sight of the flatheaded reptilian thing, clutching a sheaf of bronze arrows, that watched them.

HAGUE had lost count of days again when he looked up into the shadowy forest roof, his feet finding their way unconsciously through the thin mud, his ears registering automatically the murmurs of talk behind him, the supply cart's tortured creaking, and the continuous Sonar drone. The air felt different, warmer than its usual steam bath heat, close and charged with expectancy, and the forest seemed to crouch in waiting with the repressed silence of a hunting cat.

Crosse yelled thinly from the rear of the file, and they all halted to listen, the hauling crew dropping their harness thankfully. Hague turned back and saw Crosse's thin arm waving a rifle overhead, then pointing down the trail. The Lieutenant listened carefully until he caught the sound, a thin call, the sound of a horn mellowed by distance.

The men unthinkingly moved in close and threw wary looks into the forest ways around them.

"Move further ahead, Hague. Must be more lizard men." Clark swore, with tired despair. "All right, let's get moving and make it fast."

The cart creaked ahead again, moving faster this time, and the snicking of rifle bolts came to Hague. He moved swiftly ahead on the trail and glanced up again, saw breaks in the forest roof, and realized that the huge trees were pitching wildly far above.

"Look up," he yelled, "wind coming!"

The wind came suddenly, striking with stone wall solidity. Hague sprinted to the cart, and the struggling body of men worked it off the trail, and into a buttress angle of two great tree roots, lashing it there with nylon ropes. The wind velocity increased, smashing torn branches overhead, and ripping at the men who lay with their heads well down in the mud. Tiny animals were blown hurtling past, and once a great spider came flailing in cartwheel fashion, then smashed brokenly against a tree.

The wind drone rose in volume, the air darkened, and Hague lost sight of the other men from behind his huddled shelter against a wall like root. The great trees twisted with groaning protest, and thunderous crashes came downward through the forest, with sometimes the faint squeak of a dying or frightened animal. The wind halted for a breathless, hushed moment of utter stillness, broken only by the dropping of limbs and the scurry of small life forms—then came the screaming fury from the opposite direction.

For a moment, the gunnery officer thought he'd be torn from the root to which his clawing fingers clung: Its brutal force smashed breath from Hague's lungs and held him pinned in his corner until he struggled choking for air as a drowning man does. It seemed that he couldn't draw breath, that the air was a solid mass from which he could no longer get life. Then the wind stopped as suddenly as it had come, leaving dazed quiet. As he stumbled back to the cart, Hague saw crushed beneath a thigh-sized limb a feebly moving

reptilian head; and the dying eyes of the lizard-man were still able to stare at him in cold malevolence.

The supply cart was still intact, roped between buttressing roots to belt knives driven into the tough wood. Hague and Clark freed it, called a hasty roll, and the march was resumed at a fast pace through cooled, cleaner air. They could no longer hear horn sounds; but the grim knowledge that lizard-men were near them lent strength, and Hague led as rapidly as he dared, listening carefully to the Sonar's drone behind him, altering his course when the sound faded, and straightening out when it grew in volume.

A day slipped by and another, and the cart rolled ahead through thin greasy mud on the forest floor, with the Sonar's drone mingled with murmuring men's voices talking of food. It was the universal topic, and they carefully worked out prolonged menus each would engorge when they reached home. They forgot heat, insect bites, the sapping humidity, and talked of food—steaming roasts, flanked by crystal goblets of iced wine, oily roasted nuts, and lush, crisp green salads.

V

HAGUE, AGAIN MARCHING ahead with Balistierri, broke into the comparatively bright clearing, and was blinded for a moment by the sudden, cloud-strained light after days of forest darkness. As their eyes accommodated to the lemon-colored glare, he and Balistierri sighted the animals squatting beneath low bushes that grew thickly in the clearing. They were monkey-like primates with golden tawny coats, a cockatoo crest of white flaring above dog faces. The monkeys stared a moment, the great white crests rising doubtfully, ivory canine teeth fully three inches long bared.

They'd been feeding on fruit that dotted the shrub-filled clearing; but now one screamed a warning, and they sprang into vines that made a matted wall on every side. The two rifles cracked together again, and three fantastically colored bodies lay quiet, while the rest of the troop fled screaming into tree tops and disappeared.

At the blast of sound, a fluttering kaleidoscope of color swept up about the startled rocketeers, and they stood blinded, while mad whorls of color whirled around them in a miniature storm.

"Giant butterflies," Balistierri was screaming in ecstasy. "Look at them! Big as a dove!"

Hague watched the bright insects coalesce into one agitated mass of vermillion, azure, metallic green, and sulphur yellow twenty feet overhead. The pulsating mass of hues resolved itself into single insects, with wings large as dinnerplates, and they streamed out of sight over the forest roof.

"What were they?" he grinned at Balistierri. "Going to name them after Bormann?"

The slight zoologist still watched the spot where they'd vanished.

"Does it matter much what I call them? Do you really believe any one will ever be able to read this logbook I'm making?" He eyed the gunnery officer bleakly, then, "Well, come on. We'd better skin these monks. They're food anyway."

Hague followed Balistierri, and they stood looking down at the golden furred primates. The zoologist knelt, fingered a bedraggled white crest, and remarked, "These blast cartridges don't leave much meat, do they? Hardly enough for the whole party." He pulled a tiny metal block, with a hook and dial, from his pocket, loped the hook through a tendon in the monkey's leg and lifted the dead animal.

"Hmmm. Forty-seven pounds. Not bad." He weighed each in turn, made measurements, and entered these in his pocket notebook.

The circle around Sewell, who presided over the cook unit, was merry that night. The men's eyes were bright in the heater glow as they stuffed their shrunken stomachs with monkey meat and the fruits the monkeys had been eating when Hague and Balistierri surprised them. Swenson and Crosse and Whitcomb, the photographer, overate and were violently sick; but the others sat picking their teeth contentedly in a close circle. Bormann pulled his harmonica from his shirt pocket, and the hard, silvery torrent of music set them to sing-

ing softly. Hague and Blake, the bacteriologist, stood guard among the trees.

At dawn, they were marching again, stepping more briskly over tiny creeks, through green-tinted mud, and the wet heat. At noon, they heard the horn again, and Clark ordered silence and a faster pace. They swung swiftly, eating iron rations as they marched. Hague leaned into his cart harness and watched perspiration staining through Bormann's shirted back just ahead of him. Behind, Sergeant Brian tugged manfully, and growled under his breath at buzzing insects, slapping occasionally with a low howl of muted anguish. Helen, the skin bird, rode on Bormann's shoulder, staring back into Hague's face with questioning chirps; and Hague was whistling softly between his teeth at her, when Bormann stopped suddenly and Hague slammed into him. Helen took flight with a startled squawk, and Clark came loping back to demand quiet. Bormann stared at the two officers, his young-old face blank with surprise.

"I'm, I'm shot," he stuttered, and stared wonderingly at the thing thrusting from the side opening in his chest armor. It was one of the fragile bronze arrows, gleaming metallically in the forest gloom.

Hague cursed, and jerked free of the cart harness.

"Here, I'll get it free." He tugged at the shaft, and Bormann's face twisted. Hague stepped back. "Where's Sewell? This thing must be barbed."

"Back off the trail! Form a wide circle around the cart, but stay under cover! Fight 'em on their own ground!" Clark was yelling, and the men clustered about the cart faded into forest corridors.

Hague and Sewell, left alone, dragged Bormann's limp length beneath the metal cart. Hague leaped erect again, manhandled the pneumatic gun off the cart and onto the trail, spun the charger crank, and lay down in firing position. Behind him, Sewell grunted, "He's gone. Arrow poison must have paralyzed his diaphragm and chest muscles."

"Okay. Get up here and handle the ammunition. Hague's face was savage as the medical technician crawled into pos-

ition beside him and opened an ammunition carrier.

"Watch the trail behind me," Hague continued, slamming up the top cover plate and jerking a belt through the pneumatic breech. "When I yell charge, spin the charger crank; and when I yell off a number, set the meter arrow at that number." He snapped the cover plate shut and locked it.

"The other way! They're coming the other way!" Sewell lumbered to his knees, and the two heaved the gun around. A blowgun arrow rattled off the cart body above them, and gobbling yells filtered among the trees with an answering crack of explosive cartridges. A screaming knot of grey figures came sprinting down on the cart. Hague squeezed the pneumatic's trigger, the gun coughed, and blue-fire-limned lizard men crumpled in the trail mud.

"Okay, give 'em a few the other way."

The two men horsed the gun around and sent a buzzing flock of explosive loads down the forest corridor opening ahead of the cart. They began firing carefully down other corridors opening off the trail, aiming delicately less their missiles explode too close and the concussion kill their own men; but they worked a blasting circle of destruction that smashed the great trees back in the forest and made openings in the forest roof. Blue fire flashed in the shadows and froze weird tableaux of screaming lizard-men and hurtling mud, branches, and great splinters of wood.

An exulting yell burst behind them. Hague saw Sewell stare over his shoulder, face contorted, then the big medical technician sprang to his feet. Hague rolled hard, pulling his belt knife, and saw Sewell and a grey man-shape locked in combat above him, saw leathery grey claws drive a bronze knife into the medic's unarmored throat; and then the gunnery officer was on his feet, knife slashing, and the lizard-man fell across the prone Sewell. An almost audible silence fell over the forest, and Hague saw Rocketeers filtering back onto the cart trail, rifles cautiously extended at ready.

"Where's Clark?" he asked Lenkranz. The grey-haired metals man gazed back

dully.

"I haven't seen him since we left the trail. I was with Swenson."

The others moved in, and Hague listed the casualties. Sewell, Bormann, and Lieutenant Clark. Gunnery Officer Clarence Hague was now in command. That the Junior Lieutenant now commanded Ground Expeditionary Patrol Number One trickled into his still numb brain; and he wondered for a moment what the Base Commander would think of their chances if he knew. Then he took stock of his little command.

There was young Crosse, his face twitching nervously. There was Blake, the tall, quiet bacteriologist; Lenkranz, the metals man; Hirooka, the Nisei; Balistierra; Whitcomb, the photographer, with a battered Hasselblad still dangling by its neck cord against his armored chest. Swenson was still there, the big Swede crewman; and imperturbable Sergeant Brian, who was now calmly cleaning the pneumatic gun's loading mechanism. And, Helen, Bormann's skin bird, fluttering over the ration cart, beneath which Bormann and Sewell lay in the mud.

"Crosse, Lenkranz, burial detail. Get going." It was Hague's first order as Commander. He thought the two looked most weebegone of the party, and figured digging might loosen their nerves.

Crosse stared at him, and then sat suddenly against a tree bole.

"I'm not going to dig. I'm not going to march. This is crazy. We're going to get killed. I'll wait for it right here. Why do we keep walking and walking when we're going to die anyway?" His rising voice cracked, and he burst into hysterical laughter. Sergeant Brian rose quietly from his gun cleaning, jerked Crosse to his feet, and slapped him into quiet. Then he turned to Hague.

"Shall I take charge of the burial detail, sir?"

Hague nodded; and suddenly his long dislike of the iron-hard Sergeant melted into warm liking and admiration. Brian was the man who'd get them all through.

The Sergeant knotted his dark brows truculently at Hague. "And I don't believe Crosse meant what he said. He's a

very brave man. We all get a little jumpy. But he's a good man, a good Rocketeer."

THREE markers beside the trail, and a pile of dumped equipment marked the battle ground when the cart swung forward again. Hague had dropped all the recording instruments, saving only Whitcomb's exposed films, the rations, rifle ammunition, and logbooks that had been kept by different members of the science section. At his command, Sergeant Brian reluctantly smashed the pneumatic gun's firing mechanism, and left the gun squatting on its tripod beside charger and shell belts. With the lightened load, Hague figured three men could handle the cart, and he took his place with Brian and Crosse in the harness. The others no longer walked in the trail, but filtered between great root-flanges and tree boles on either side, guiding themselves by the Sonar's hum.

They left no more trail markers, and Hague cautioned them against making any unnecessary noise.

"No trail markers ahead us. This mud is watery enough to hide footprints in a few minutes. We're making no noise, and we'll drop no more refuse. All they can hear will be the Sonar, and that won't carry far."

On the seventy-first day of the march, Hague squatted, fell almost to the ground, and grunted, "Take ten."

He stared at the stained, ragged scarecrows hunkered about him in forest mud.

"Why do we do it?" he asked no one in particular. "Why do we keep going, and going, and going? Why don't we just lie down and die? That would be the easiest thing I could think of right now." He knew that Rocket Service officers didn't talk that way, but he didn't feel like an officer, just a tired, feverish, bone-weary man.

"Have we got a great glowing tradition to inspire us?" he snarled. "No, we're just the lousy rocketeers that every other service arm plans to absorb. We haven't a Grant or a John Paul Jones to provide an example in a tough spot. The U.S. Rocket Service has nothing but the memory of some ships that went out and never came

back; and you can't make a legend out of men who just plain vanish."

There was silence, and it looked as if the muddy figures were too exhausted to reply. Then Sergeant Brian spoke.

"The Rocketeers have a legend, sir."

"What legend, Brian?" Hague snorted.

"Here is the legend, sir. 'George Easy Peter One'."

Hague laughed hollowly, but the Sergeant continued as if he hadn't heard.

"Ground Expeditionary Patrol One—the outfit a planet couldn't lick. Venus threw her grab bag at us, animals, swamps, poison plants, starvation, fever, and we kept right on coming. She just made us smarter, and tougher, and harder to beat. And we'll blast through these lizard-men and the jungle, and march into Base like the whole U.S. Armed Forces on review."

"Let's go," Hague called, and they staggered up again, nine gaunt bundles of sodden, muddy rags, capped in trim black steel helmets with cheek guards down. The others slipped off the trail, and Hague, Brian, and Crosse pulled on the cart harness and lurched forward. The cart wheel hub jammed against a tree bole, and as they strained blindly ahead to free it, a horn note drifted from afar.

"Here they come again," Crosse groaned.

"They—won't be—up—with us—for days," Hague grunted, while he threw his weight in jerks against the tow line. The cart lurched free with a lunge, and all three shot forward and sprawled raging in the muddy trail.

They sat wiping mud from their faces, when Brian stopped suddenly, ripped off his helmet and threw it aside, then sat tensely forward in an attitude of strained listening. Hague had time to wonder dully if the man's brain had snapped, before he crawled to his feet.

"Shut up, and listen," Brian was snarling. "Hear it! Hear it! It's a klaxon! Way off, about every two seconds!"

Hague tugged off his heavy helmet, and strained every nerve to listen. Over the forest silence it came with pulse like regularity, a tiny whisper of sound.

He and Brian stared bright-eyed at each other, not quite daring to say which they

were thinking. Crosse got up and leaned like an empty sack against the cartwheel with an inane questioning look.

"What is it?" When they stared at him without speaking, still listening intently, "It's the Base. That's it, it's the Base!"

Something choked Hague's throat, then he was yelling and firing his rifle. The rest came scuttling out of the forest shadow, faces breaking into wild grins, and they joined Hague, the forest rocking with gunfire. They moved forward, and Hirooka took up a thin chant:

"Oooooooh, the Rocketeers
have shaggy ears.
They're dirty——."

The rest of their lyrics wouldn't look well in print; but where the Rocketeers have gone, on every frontier of space, the ribald song is sung. The little file moved down the trail toward the klaxon sound. Behind them, something moved in the gloom, resolved itself into a reptile-headed, man-like thing, that reared a small wooden trumpet to fit its mouth, a soft horn note floated clear; and other shapes became visible, sprinting forward, flitting through the gloom . . .

WHEN a red light flashed over Chapman's desk, he flung down a sheaf of papers and hurried down steel-walled corridors to the number one shaft. A tiny elevator swept him to Odysseus' upper side, where a shallow pit had been set in the ship's scarred skin, and a pneumatic gun installed. Chapman hurried past the gun and crew to stand beside a listening device. The four huge cones loomed dark against the clouds, the operator in their center was a blob of shadow in the dawnlight, where he huddled listening to a chanting murmur that came from his headset. Blake came running onto the gun-deck; Bjornson, and the staff officers were all there.

"Cut it into the Address system," Chapman told the Listener operator excitedly; and the faint sounds were amplified through the whole ship. From humming Address amplifiers, the ribald words broke in a hoarse melody.

"The rocketeers have shaggy ears, They're dirty——"

The rest described in vivid detail the prowess of rocketeers in general.

"How far are they?" Chapman demanded.

The operator pointed at a dial, fingered a knob that altered his receiving cones split-seconds of angle. "They're about twenty-five miles, sir."

Chapman turned to the officers gathered in an exultant circle behind him.

"Branch, here's your chance for action. Take thirty men, our whippet tank, and go out to them. Bjornson, get the 'copters aloft for air cover."

Twenty minutes later, Chapman watched a column assemble beneath the Odysseus' gleaming side, and march into the jungle, with the 'copters buzzing west a moment later, like vindictive dragon flies.

Breakfast was brought to the men clustered at Warnings equipment, and to Chapman at his post on the gundeck. The day ticked away, the parade ground vanished in thickening clots of night; and a second dawn found the watchers still at their posts, listening to queer sounds that trickled from the speakers. The singing had stopped; but once they heard a note that a horn might make, and several times gobbling yells that didn't sound human. George One was fighting, they knew now. The listeners picked up crackling of rifle fire, and when that died there was silence.

The watchers heard a short cheer that died suddenly, as the relief column and George One met; and they waited and watched. Branch, who headed the relief column communicated with the mother ship by the simple expedient of yelling, the sound being picked up by the listeners.

"They're coming in, Chapman. I'm coming behind to guard their rear. They've been attacked by some kind of lizard-men. I'm not saying a thing—see for yourself when they arrive."

Hours rolled past, while they speculated in low tones, the hush that held the ship growing taut and strained.

"Surely Branch would have told us if

anything was wrong, or if the records were lost," Chapman barked angrily. "Why did he have to be so damned melodramatic?"

"Look, there—through the trees. A helmet glinted!" The laconic Bjornson had thrown dignity to the winds, and capered like a drunken goat, as Rindell described it later.

Chapman stared down at the jungle edging the parade ground and caught a movement.

A man with a rifle came through the fringe and stood eying the ship in silence, and then came walking forward across the long, cindered expanse. From this height, he looked to Chapman like a child's lead soldier, a ragged, muddy, midget scarecrow. Another stir in the trees, and one more man, skulking like an infantry flanker with rifle at ready. He, too, straightened and came walking quietly forward. A file of three men came next, leaning into the harness of a little metal cart that bumped drunkenly as they dragged it forward. An instant of waiting, and two more men stole from the jungle, more like attacking infantry than returning heroes. Chapman waited, and no more came. This was all.

"My God, no wonder Branch wouldn't tell us. There were thirty-two of them." Rindell's voice was choked.

"Yes, only seven." Chapman remembered his field glasses and focused them on the seven approaching men. "Lieutenant Hague is the only officer. And they're handing us the future of the U. S. Rocket Service on that little metal cart."

The quiet shattered and a yelling horde of men poured from Odysseus' hull and engulfed the tattered seven, sweeping around them, yelling, cheering, and carrying them toward the mother ship.

Chapman looked a little awed as he turned to the officers behind him. "Well they did it. We forward these records, and we've proven that we can do the job." He broke into a grin. "What am I talking about? Of course we did the job. We'll always do the job. We're the Rocketeers, aren't we?"

Forever And The Earth

By RAY BRADBURY

They brought that great blazing writer three hundred years into the future. They gave him the stars and planets and all space for his hungry pen. Then they tried to put Thomas Wolfe back in his grave.

AFTER SEVENTY YEARS OF writing short stories that never sold, Mr. Henry William Field arose one night at 11:30 and burned ten million words. He carried the manuscripts downstairs through his dark old mansion and threw them into the furnace.

"That's that," he said, and thinking about his lost art and his misspent life, he put himself to bed, among his rich antiques. "My mistake was in ever trying to picture this wild world of 2257 A.D. The rockets, the atom wonders, the travels to planets and double suns. Nobody can do it. Everyone's tried. All of our modern authors have failed."

Space was too big for them, and rockets too swift, and atomic science too instantaneous, he thought. But at least the other writers, while failing, had been published, while he, in his idle wealth, had used the years of his life for nothing.

After an hour of feeling this way, he fumbled through the night rooms to his library and switched on a green hurricane lamp. At random, from a collection untouched in fifty years, he selected a book. It was a book three centuries yellow and three centuries brittle, but he settled into it and read hungrily until dawn . . .

At nine o'clock, Henry William Field, rushed from his library, called his servants, televised lawyers, friends, scientists, literateurs.

"Come at once!" he cried.

Within the hour, a dozen people hurried into the study where Henry William Field sat, very disreputable and hysterical with an odd, feeding joy, unshaven and feverish. He clutched a thick book in his brittle arms and laughed if any one even said good morning.

"Here you see a book," he said at last, holding it out, "written by a giant, a man born in Asheville, North Carolina, in the

year 1900. Long gone to dust, he published four huge novels. He was a whirlwind. He lifted up mountains and collected winds. He left a trunk of pencilled manuscripts behind when he lay in bed at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore in the year 1938, on September 15th, and died of pneumonia, an ancient and awful disease."

They looked at the book.

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL.

He drew forth three more. OF TIME AND THE RIVER. THE WEB AND THE ROCK. YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN.

"By Thomas Wolfe," said the old man. "Three centuries cold in the North Carolina earth."

"You mean you've called us simply to see four books by a dead man?" his friends protested.

"More than that! I've called you because I feel Tom Wolfe's the man, the necessary man, to write of space, of time, huge things like nebulae and galactic war, meteors and planets, all the dark things he loved and put on paper were like this. He was born out of his time. He needed really *big* things to play with and never found them on Earth. He should have been born this afternoon instead of one hundred thousand mornings ago."

"I'm afraid you're a bit late," said Professor Bolton.

"I don't intend to be late!" snapped the old man. "I will *not* be frustrated by reality. You, professor, have experimented with time-travel. I expect you to finish your time machine this month. Here's a check, a blank check, fill it in. If you need more money, ask for it. You've done *some* traveling already, haven't you?"

"A few years, yes, but nothing like centuries——"



Mayan

"We'll *make* it centuries! You others—" he swept them with a fierce and shining glance, "—will work with Bolton. I *must* have Thomas Wolfe."

"What!" They fell back before him.

"Yes," he said. "That's the plan. Wolfe is to be brought to me. We will collaborate in the task of describing the flight from Earth to Mars, as only he could describe it!"

They left him in his library with his books, turning the dry pages, nodding to himself. "Yes. Oh, dear Lord yes, Tom's the boy, Tom is the *very* boy for this."

THE MONTH passed slowly. Days showed a maddening reluctance to leave the calendar, and weeks lingered on until Mr. Henry William Field began to scream silently.

At the end of the month, Mr. Field awoke one midnight. The phone was ringing. He put his hand out in the darkness.

"Yes?"

"This is Professor Bolton calling."

"Yes, Bolton?"

"I'll be leaving in an hour," said the voice.

"Leaving? Leaving where? Are you quitting? You can't do that!"

"Please, Mr. Field, leaving means *leaving*."

"You mean, you're actually going?"

"Within the hour."

"To 1938? To September 15th?"

"Yes!"

"You're sure you've the date written down? You'll arrive before he dies? Be sure of it! Good Lord, you'd better get there a good hour before his death, don't you think?"

"A good hour."

"I'm so excited I can't hold the phone. Good luck, Bolton. Bring him through safely!"

"Thank you, sir. Goodbye."

The phone clicked.

MR. Henry William Field lay through the ticking night. He thought of Tom Wolfe as a lost brother to be lifted intact from under a cold, chiseled stone, to be restored to blood and fire and speak-

ing. He trembled each time he thought of Bolton whirling on the time wind back to other calendars and other faces.

Tom, he thought, faintly, in the half-awake warmth of an old man calling after his favorite and long-gone child, Tom, where are you tonight, Tom? Come along now, we'll help you through, you've got to come, there's need of you. I couldn't do it, Tom, none of us here can. So the next best thing to doing it myself, Tom, is helping you to do it. You can play with rockets like jackstraws, Tom, and you can have the stars, like a handful of crystals. Anything your heart asks, it's here. You'd like the fire and the travel, Tom, it was made for you. Oh, we've a pale lot of writers today, I've read them all, Tom, and they're not like you. I've waded in libraries of their stuff and they've never touched space, Tom; we need *you* for that! Give an old man his wish then, for God knows I've waited all my life for myself or some other to write the really great book about the stars, and I've waited in vain. So, wherever you are tonight, Tom Wolfe, make yourself tall. It's that book you were going to write. It's that good book the critics said was in you when you stopped breathing. Here's your chance, will you do it, Tom? Will you listen and come through to us, will you do that tonight, and be here in the morning when I wake? Will you, Tom?

His eyelids closed down over the fever and the demand. His tongue stopped quivering in his sleeping mouth.

The clock struck four.

A WAKENING to the white coolness of morning, he felt the excitement rising and welling in himself. He did not wish to blink, for fear that the thing which awaited him somewhere in the house might run off and slam a door, gone forever. His hands reached up to clutch his thin chest.

Far away . . . footsteps . . .

A series of doors opened and shut. Two men entered the bedroom.

Field could hear them breathe. Their footsteps took on identities. The first steps were those of a spider, small and precise: Bolton. The second steps were those of

a big man, a large man, a heavy man.

"Tom?" cried the old man. He did not open his eyes.

"Yes," said a voice, at last.

Tom Wolfe burst the seams of Field's imagination, as a huge child bursts the lining of a too-small coat.

"Tom Wolfe, let me look at you!" If Field said it once he said it a dozen times as he fumbled from bed, shaking violently. "Put up the blinds, for God's sake, I want to see this! Tom Wolfe, is that you?"

Tom Wolfe looked down from his tall thick body, with big hands out to balance himself in a world that was strange. He looked at the old man and the room and his mouth was trembling.

"You're just as they said you were, Tom!"

Thomas Wolfe began to laugh and the laughing was huge, for he must have thought himself insane or in a nightmare, and he came to the old man and touched him and he looked at Professor Bolton and felt of himself, his arms and legs, he coughed experimentally and touched his own brow. "My fever's gone," he said. "I'm not sick any more."

"Of course not, Tom."

"What a night," said Tom Wolfe. "It hasn't been easy. I thought I was sicker than any man ever was. I felt myself floating and I thought, this is fever. I felt myself traveling, and thought, I'm dying fast. A man came to me. I thought, this is the Lord's messenger. He took my hands. I smelled electricity. I flew up and over, and I saw a brass city. I thought, I've arrived. This is the city of heaven, there is the Gate! I'm numb from head to toe, like someone left in the snow to freeze. I've got to laugh and do things or I might think myself insane. You're not God, are you? You don't look like him."

The old man laughed. "No, no, Tom, not God, but playing at it. I'm Field." He laughed again. "Lord, listen to me. I said it as if you should know who Field is. Field, the financier, Tom, bow low, kiss my ring-finger. I'm Henry Field, I like your work. I brought you here. Come here."

The old man drew him to an immense crystal window.

"Do you see those lights in the sky, Tom?"

"Yes, sir."

"Those fireworks?"

"Yes."

"They're not what you think, son. It's not July Fourth, Tom. Not in the usual way. Every day's Independence Day now. Man has declared his Freedom from Earth. Gravitation without representation has been overthrown. The Revolt has long since been successful. That green Roman Candle's going to Mars. That red fire, that's the Venus rocket. And the others, you see the yellow and the blue? Rockets, all of them!"

Thomas Wolfe gazed up like an immense child caught amid the colorized glories of a July evening when the set-pieces are awirl with phosphorous and glitter and barking explosion.

"What year is this?"

"The year of the rocket. Look here." And the old man touched some flowers that bloomed at his touch. The blossoms were like blue and white fire. They burned and sparkled their cold, long petals. The blooms were two feet wide, and they were the colour of an autumn moon. "Moon-flowers," said the old man. "From the other side of the moon." He brushed them and they dripped away into a silver rain, a shower of white sparks, on the air. "The year of the rocket. That's a title for you, Tom. That's why we brought you here, we've need of you. You're the only man could handle the sun without being burnt to a ridiculous cinder. We want you to juggle the sun, Tom, and the stars, and what ever else you see on your trip to Mars."

"Mars?" Thomas Wolfe turned to seize the old man's arm, bending down to him, searching his face in unbelief.

"Tonight. You leave at six o'clock."

The old man held a fluttering pink ticket on the air, waiting for Tom to think to take it.

IT WAS five in the afternoon. "Of course, of course I appreciate what you've done," cried Thomas Wolfe.

"Sit down, Tom. Stop walking around."

"Let me finish, Mr. Field, let me get through with this, I've got to say it."

"We've been arguing for hours," pleaded Mr. Field, exhaustedly.

They had talked from breakfast until lunch until tea, they had wandered through a dozen rooms and ten dozen arguments, they had perspired and grown cold and perspired again.

"It all comes down to this," said Thomas Wolfe, at last. "I can't stay here, Mr. Field. I've got to go back. This isn't my time. You've no right to interfere—"

"But, I—"

"I was amidst my work, my best was yet to come, and now you hurry me off three centuries. Mr. Field, I want you to call Mr. Bolton back. I want you to have him put me in his machine, whatever it is, and return me to 1938, my rightful place and year. That's all I ask of you."

"But, don't you *want* to see Mars?"

"With all my heart. But I know it isn't for me. It would throw my writing off. I'd have a huge handful of experience that I couldn't fit into my other writing when I went home."

"You don't understand, Tom, you don't understand at all."

"I understand that you're selfish."

"Selfish? Yes," said the old man. "For myself, and for others, very selfish."

"I want to go home."

"Listen to me, Tom."

"Call Mr. Bolton."

"Tom, I don't want to have to tell you this. I thought I wouldn't have to, that it wouldn't be necessary. Now, you leave me only this alternative." The old man's right hand fetched hold of a curtained wall, swept back the drapes revealing a large white screen, and dialed a number, a series of numbers, the screen flickered into vivid color, the lights of the room darkened, darkened, and a graveyard took line before their eyes.

"What are you doing?" demanded Wolfe, striding forward, staring at the screen.

"I don't like this at all," said the old man. "Look there."

The graveyard lay in mid-afternoon light, the light of summer. From the

screen drifted the smell of summer earth, granite, and the odor of a nearby creek. From the trees, a bird called. Red and yellow flowers nodded among the stones, and the screen moved, the sky rotated, the old man twisted a dial for emphasis, and in the center of the screen, growing large, coming closer, yet larger, and now filling their senses was a dark granite mass and Thomas Wolfe, looking up in the dim room, ran his eyes over the chiseled words, once, twice, three times, gasped, and read again, for there was his name:

THOMAS WOLFE.

And the date of his birth and the date of his death, and the flowers and green ferns smelling sweetly on the air of the cold room.

"Turn it off," he said.

"I'm sorry, Tom."

"Turn it off, turn it off! I don't believe it."

"It's there."

The screen went black and now the entire room was a midnight vault, a tomb, with the last faint odor of flowers.

"I didn't wake up again," said Thomas Wolfe.

"No. You died that September of 1938."

"I never finished my book."

"It was edited for you, by others who went over it, carefully."

"I didn't finish my work, I didn't finish my work."

"Don't take it so badly, Tom."

"How else can I take it?"

THE old man didn't turn on the lights. He didn't want to see Tom there. "Sit down, boy." No reply. "Tom?" No answer. "Sit down, son; will you have something to drink?" For answer there was only a sigh and a kind of brutal morning. "Good Lord," said Tom, "it's not fair. I had so much left to do, it's not fair." He began to weep quietly.

"Don't do that," said the old man. "Listen. Listen to me. You're still alive, aren't you? Here? Now? You still *feel*, don't you?"

Thomas Wolfe waited for a minute and then he said, "Yes."

"All right, then." The old man pressed forward on the dark air. "I've brought

you here, I've given you another chance, Tom. An extra month or so. Do you think I haven't grieved for you? When I read your books and saw your gravestone there, three centuries worn by rains and wind, boy, don't you imagine how it killed me to think of your talent gone away? Well, it did! It killed me, Tom. And I spent my money to find a way to you. You've got a respite, not long, not long at all. Professor Bolton says that, with luck, he can hold the channels open through time for eight weeks. He can keep you here that long, and only that long. In that interval, Tom, you must write the book you've wanted to write—no, not the book you were working on for them, son, no, for they're dead and gone and it can't be changed. No, this time it's a book for us, Tom, for us the living, that's the book we want. A book you can leave with us, for you, a book bigger and better in every way than anything you ever wrote; say you'll do it, Tom, say you'll forget about that stone and that hospital for eight weeks and start to work for us, will you, Tom, will you?"

The lights came slowly on. Tom Wolfe stood tall at the window, looking out, his face huge and tired and pale. He watched the rockets on the sky of early evening. "I imagine I don't realize what you've done for me," he said. "You've given me a little more time, and time is the thing I love most and need, the thing I always hated and fought against, and the only way I can show my appreciation is by doing as you say." He hesitated. "And when I'm finished, then what?"

"Back to your hospital in 1938, Tom."

"Must I?"

"We can't change time. We borrowed you for five minutes. We'll return you to your hospital cot five minutes after you left it. That way, we upset nothing. It's all been written. You can't hurt us in the future by living here now with us, but, if you refused to go back, you could hurt the past, and resultantly, the future, make it into some sort of chaos."

"Eight weeks," said Thomas Wolfe.

"Eight weeks."

"And the Mars rocket leaves in an hour?"

"Yes."

"I'll need pencils and paper."

"Here they are."

"I'd better go get ready. Goodbye, Mr. Field."

"Good luck, Tom."

Six o'clock. The sun setting. The sky turning to wine. The big house quiet. The old man shivering in the heat until Professor Bolton entered. "Bolton, how is he getting on, how was he at the port; tell me?"

Bolton smiled. "What a monster he is, so big, they had to make a special uniform for him! You should've seen him, walking around, lifting up everything, sniffing like a great hound, talking, his eyes looking at everyone, excited as a ten-year-old!"

"God bless him, oh, God bless him! Bolton, can you keep him here as long as you say?"

Bolton frowned. "He doesn't belong here, you know. If our power should falter, he'd be snapped back to his own time, like a puppet on a rubber band. We'll try and keep him, I assure you."

"You've got to, you understand, you can't let him go back until he's finished with his book. You've—"

"Look," said Bolton. He pointed to the sky. On it was a silver rocket.

"Is that him?" asked the old man.

"That's Tom Wolfe," replied Bolton. "Going to Mars."

"Give 'em hell, Tom, give 'em hell!" shouted the old man, lifting both fists.

They watched the rocket fire into space.

BY MIDNIGHT, the story was coming through.

Henry William Field sat in his library. On his desk was a machine that hummed. It repeated words that were being written out beyond the Moon. It scrawled them in black pencil, in facsimile of Tom Wolfe's fevered hand a million miles away. The old man waited for a pile of them to collect and then he seized them and read them aloud to the room where Bolton and the servants stood listening. He read the words about space and time and travel, about a large man and a large journey and how it was in the long midnight and coldness of space, and how a man could

be hungry enough to take all of it and ask for more. He read the words that were full of fire and thunder and mystery.

Space was like October, wrote Thomas Wolfe. He said things about its darkness and its loneliness and man so small in it. The eternal and timeless October, was one of the things he said. And then he told of the rocket itself, the smell and the feel of the metal of the rocket, and the sense of destiny and wild exultancy to at last leave Earth behind, all problems and all sadnesses, and go seeking a bigger problem and a bigger sadness. Oh, it was fine writing, and it said what had to be said about space and man and his small rockets out there alone.

The old man read until he was hoarse, and then Bolton read, and then the others, far into the night, when the machine stopped transcribing words and they knew that Tom Wolfe was in bed, then, on the rocket, flying to Mars, probably not asleep, no, he wouldn't sleep for hours yet, no, lying awake, like a boy the night before a circus, not believing the big jewelled black tent is up and the circus is on, with ten billion blazing performers on the high wires and the invisible trapezes of space.

"There," breathed the old man, gentling aside the last pages of the first chapter. "What do you think of that, Bolton?"

"It's good."

"Good, hell!" shouted Field. "It's wonderful! Read it again, sit down, read it again, damn you!"

It kept coming through, one day following another, for ten hours at a time. The stack of yellow papers on the floor, scribbled on, grew immense in a week, unbelievable in two weeks, absolutely impossible in a month.

"Listen to this!" cried the old man, and read.

"And this!" he said.

"And this chapter here, and this little novel here, it just came through, Bolton, titled THE SPACE WAR, a complete novel on how it feels to fight a space war. Tom's been talking to people, soldiers, officers, men, veterans of space. He's got it all here. And here's a chapter called THE LONG MIDNIGHT, and here's one on the Negro colonization of Mars,

and here's a character sketch of a Martian, absolutely priceless!"

Bolton cleared his throat. "Mr. Field?" "Yes, yes, don't bother me."

"I've some bad news, sir."

Field jerked his grey head up. "What? The time element?"

"You'd better tell Wolfe to hurry his work. The connection may break some time this week," said Bolton, softly.

"I'll give you another million dollars if you keep it going!"

"It's not money, Mr. Field. It's just plain physics right now. I'll do everything I can. But you'd better warn him, is all I say."

The old man shriveled away into his chair and was small. "But you can't take him away from me now, not when he's doing so well. You should see the outline he sent through, an hour ago, the stories, the sketches. Here, here's one on spatial tides, another on meteors. Here's a short novel begun called THISTLEDOWN AND FIRE—"

"I'm sorry."

"If we lose him now, can we get him again?"

"I'd be afraid to tamper too much."

The old man was frozen. "Only one thing to do then. Arrange to have Wolfe type his work, if possible, or dictate it, to save time, rather than have him use pencil and paper, he's got to use a machine of some sort. See to it!"

The machine ticked away by the hour into the night and into the dawn and through the day. The old man slept only in faint dozes, blinking awake when the machine stuttered to life, and all of space and travel and existence came to him through the mind of another:

"... the great starred meadows of space . . ."

The machine jumped.

"Keep at it, Tom, show them!" The old man waited.

The phone rang.

It was Bolton.

"We can't keep it up, Mr. Field. The time contact will fade some time in the next minute."

"Do something!"

"I can't."

The teletype chattered. In a cold fascination, in a horror, the old man watched the black lines form.

"... the Martian cities, immense and unbelievable, as numerous as stones thrown from some great mountain in a rushing and incredible avalanche, resting at last in shining mounds ..."

"Tom!" cried the old man.

"Now," said Bolton, on the phone.

The teletype hesitated, typed a word, and fell silent.

"Tom!" screamed the old man.

He shook the teletype.

"It's no use," said the telephone voice.

"He's gone. I'm shutting off the Time Machine."

"No! Leave it on!"

"But—"

"You heard me—leave it! We're not sure he's gone."

"He is. It's no use, we're wasting energy."

"Waste it, then!"

He slammed the phone down.

He turned to the teletype, to the unfinished sentence.

"Come on, Tom, they can't get rid of you that way, you won't let them, will you, boy, come on. Tom, show them, you're big, you're bigger than time or space or their damned machines, you're strong and you've a will like iron, Tom, show them, don't let them send you back!"

The teletype snapped one key.

The old man bleated. "Tom! You are there, aren't you? Can you still write? Write, Tom, keep it coming, as long as you keep it rolling, Tom, they can't send you back!"

"The," typed the machine.

"More, Tom, more!"

"Odors of," clacked the machine.

"Yes?"

"Mars," typed the machine, and paused. A minute's silence. The machine spaced, skipped a paragraph, and began:

The odors of Mars, the cinnamons and cold spice winds, the winds of cloudy dust and winds of powerful bone and ancient pollen—

"Tom, you're still alive!"

For answer the machine, in the next ten

hours, slammed out six chapters of FLIGHT BEFORE FURY in a series of fevered explosions.

TODAY makes six weeks, Bolton, six whole weeks, Tom gone, on Mars, through the Asteroids. Look here, the manuscripts. Ten thousand words a day, he's driving himself, I don't know when he sleeps, or if he eats, I don't care, he doesn't either, he only wants to get it done, because he knows the time is short."

"I can't understand it," said Bolton. "The power failed because our relays wore out. It took us three days to manufacture and replace the particular channel relays necessary to keep the Time Element steady and yet Wolfe hung on. There's a personal factor here, Lord knows what, we didn't take into account. Wolfe lives here, in this time, when he is here, and can't be snapped back, after all. Time isn't as flexible as we imagined. We used the wrong simile. It's not like a rubberband. More like osmosis; the penetration of membranes by liquids, from Past to Present, but we've got to send him back, can't keep him here, there'd be a void there, a derangement. The one thing that really keeps him here now is himself, his drive, his desire, his work. After it's over he'll go back as naturally as pouring water from a glass."

"I don't care about reasons, all I know is Tom is finishing it. He has the old fire and description, and something else, some thing more, a searching of values that supersede time and space. He's done a study of a woman left behind on Earth while the brave rocket heroes leap into space that's beautiful, objective and subtle; he calls it DAY OF THE ROCKET, and it is nothing more than an afternoon of a typical suburban housewife who lives as her ancestral mothers lived, in a house, raising her children, her life not much different from a cavewoman's, in the midst of the splendor of science and the trumpetings of space projectiles; a true and steady and subtle study of her wishes and frustrations. Here's another manuscript called THE INDIANS, in which he refers to the Martians as Cherokees and Iroquois and Blackfoots, the Indian nations of

space, destroyed and driven back. Have a drink, Bolton, have a drink!"

TOM WOLFE returned to Earth at the end of eight weeks.

He arrived in fire as he had left in fire, and his huge steps were burned across space, and in the library of Henry William Field's house were towers of yellow paper, with lines of black scribble and type on them, and these were to be separated out into the six sections of a masterwork that, through endurance, and a knowing that the sands were dwindling from the glass, had mushroomed day on day.

Tom Wolfe came back to Earth and stood in the library of Henry William Field's house and looked at the massive outpourings of his heart and his hand and when the old man said, "Do you want to read it, Tom?" he shook his great head and replied, putting back his thick mane of dark hair with his big pale hand, "No. I don't dare start on it. If I did, I'd want to take it home with me. And I can't do that, can I?"

"No, Tom, you can't."

"No matter *how* much I wanted to?"

"No, that's the way it is. You never wrote another novel in that year, Tom. What was written here must stay here, what was written there must stay there. There's no touching it."

"I see." Tom sank down into a chair with a great sigh. "I'm tired. I'm mightily tired. It's been hard, but it's been good. What day is it?"

"This is the sixtieth day."

"The *last* day?"

The old man nodded and they were both silent awhile.

"Back to 1938 in the stone cemetery," said Tom Wolfe, eyes shut. "I don't like that. I wish I didn't know about that, it's a horrible thing to know." His voice faded and he put his big hands over his face and held them tightly there.

The door opened. Bolton let himself in and stood behind Tom Wolfe's chair, a small phial in his hand.

"What's that?" asked the old man.

"An extinct virus. Pneumonia. Very ancient and very evil," said Bolton. "When Mr. Wolfe came through, I had to cure

him of his illness, of course, which was immensely easy with the techniques we know today, in order to put him in working condition for his job, Mr. Field. I kept this pneumonia culture. Now that he's going back, he'll have to be reinoculated with the disease."

"Otherwise?"

Tom Wolfe looked up.

"Otherwise, he'd get well, in 1938."

Tom Wolfe arose from his chair. "You mean, get well, walk around, back there, be well, and cheat the mortician?"

"That's what I mean."

Tom Wolfe stared at the phial and one of his hands twitched. "What if I destroyed the virus and refused to let you inoculate me?"

"You can't do that!"

"But—supposing?"

"You'd ruin things."

"What things?"

"The pattern, life, the way things are and were, the things that can't be changed. You can't disrupt it. There's only one sure thing, you're to die, and I'm to see to it."

Wolfe looked at the door. "I could run off, go back by myself."

"We control the machine. You wouldn't get out of the house. I'd have you back here, by force, and inoculated. I anticipated some such trouble when the time came; there are five men waiting down below. One shout from me—you see, it's useless. There, that's better. Here now."

Wolfe had moved back and now had turned to look at the old man and the window and this huge house. "I'm afraid I must apologize. I don't want to die. So very much I don't want to die."

The old man came to him and shook his hand. "Think of it this way; you've had two more months than anyone could expect from life, and you've turned out another book, a last book, a fine book, think of that, and you'll feel better."

"I want to thank you for this," said Thomas Wolfe, gravely. "I want to thank both of you. I'm ready." He rolled up his sleeve. "The inoculation."

And while Bolton bent to his task, with his free hand Thomas Wolfe pencilled two black lines across the top of the first manu-

script and went on talking:

"There's a passage from one of my old books," he said, scowling to remember it. ". . . of wandering forever and the earth . . . Who owns the Earth? Did we want the Earth? that we should wander on it? Did we need the Earth that we were never still upon it? Whoever needs the Earth shall have the Earth; he shall be upon it, he shall rest within a little place, he shall dwell in one small room forever . . ."

Wolfe was finished with the remembering.

"Here's my last book," he said, and on the empty yellow paper facing it he blocked out vigorous huge black letters with pressures of the pencil:

FOREVER AND THE EARTH, by Thomas Wolfe.

He picked up a ream of it and held it tightly in his hands, against his chest, for a moment. "I wish I could take it back with me. It's like parting with my son." He gave it a slap and put it aside and immediately thereafter gave his quick hand into that of his employer, and strode across the room, Bolton after him, until he reached the door where he stood framed in the late afternoon light, huge and magnificent. "Goodbye, goodbye!" he cried.

The door slammed. Tom Wolfe was gone.

THEY found him wandering in the hospital corridor.

"Mr. Wolfe!"

"What?"

"Mr. Wolfe, you gave us a scare, we thought you were gone!"

"Gone?"

"Where did you go?"

"Where? Where?" He let himself be led through the midnight corridors. "Where? Oh, if I told you where, you'd never believe."

"Here's your bed, you shouldn't have left it."

Deep into the white death bed, which smelled of pale, clean mortality awaiting him, a mortality which had the hospital odor in it; the bed which, as he touched it, folded him into fumes and white starched coldness.

"Mars, Mars," whispered the huge man, late at night. "My best, my very best, my really fine book, yet to be written, yet to be printed, in another year, three centuries away . . ."

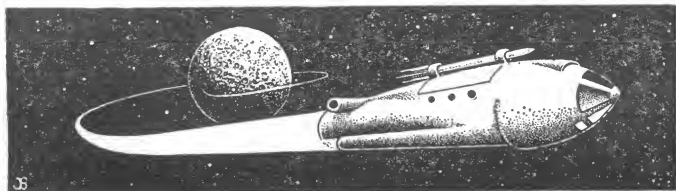
"You're tired."

"Do you really think so?" murmured Thomas Wolfe. "Was it a dream? Perhaps. A good dream."

His breathing faltered. Thomas Wolfe was dead.

IN THE passing years, flowers are found on Tom Wolfe's grave. And this is not unusual, for many people travel to linger there. But these flowers appear each night. They seem to drop from the sky. They are the color of an autumn moon, their blossoms are immense and they burn and sparkle their cold, long petals in a blue and white fire. And when the dawn wind blows they drip away into a silver rain, a shower of white sparks on the air. Tom Wolfe has been dead many, many years, but these flowers never cease. . .

Permission to quote from "Of Time and the River" gratefully acknowledged to Charles Scribner's Sons





"Why don't you answer me? I killed you once!"

The First Man On The Moon

By ALFRED COPPEL

**John Thurmon swore he'd be the first man on the moon.
But he wasn't. He was only the first murderer.**

THE SHIP LAY AT A CRAZY angle on the stark whiteness of the pumice plain. The rocket nozzles were a fused lump of slag; the fire-darkened hull crumpled and warped by the impact of landing. And there was silence . . . complete and utter silence.

There could be no return. Thurmon realized this. At first the thought had brought panic, but, as the scope of his

achievement dawned on him, the fear retreated. Bruised, giddy, half-crazed . . . the certainty of death held no terrors. Not yet. And it was worth it! Fame . . . *immortality!* Glory . . . in return for the last few years of a blighted, embittered, over-shadowed life. Yes, it was *well* worth it. And, except for the crash-landing and the certainty of no return, it had all come to pass just as he had planned it

for so long.

On his knees he caressed the gritty soil. He lifted his arms toward the Day Star flaming in the day-night of space and knew completion. Tears streaked his stubbled face, and strange noises came from his slack mouth. The ecstasy of success was almost unbearable. For this, he had labored a lifetime. For this, he had murdered a friend . . .

Across the abyss, the whole world waited for word. The transmitter in the rocket had survived the crash. The word would come, thought Thurmon . . . when he was ready to send it. And sending it, he would place the official seal of immortality on his brow. The book would close. But wonderfully, satisfyingly. There would be no other to steal his rightful glory. Only Wayne could have done that . . . and Wayne was dead. He laughed weirdly within his helmet. So simply done!

The Sea of Serenity stretched out before him in weird magnificence. In the far distance a mountain range rose precipitously from the wilderness of pumice to hump its spiny backbone at the brilliant stars. A limbo of black shadows and stark white talus slopes. Moonscape! Thurmon stumbled to his feet and fought the wave of nausea that surged over him as his equilibrium teetered from the low gravity. Then in an instant his discomfort was forgotten. Standing on the brink of the cosmos, his ego drank of grandeur. All the splendor of Creation lay before him like a jeweled carpet. All his! All for John Thurmon, genius . . . explorer . . . murderer! For John Thurmon . . . first man on the Moon!

With an effort he dragged his eyes from the sky. Slowly, his reason was returning. There was work to do. Wayne must be hidden. The next to come must never know. And it should be done quickly. Time would fly and in the last hours the fear would return. He knew that. Right now his triumph sustained him.

There was the broadcast to look forward to. A billion people waited for his words. It was a sop to his ego, but it could not make him forget that this was costing him his life. On occasion, Thurmon could

be realistic, and he knew that, when there was nothing left to do but sit and wait for the end, he would be afraid. Terribly, hideously afraid and alone. It was the only flaw in his plan for immortality. Yet, his life had been a barren thing, devoid of love or any real success. It was little enough to trade. And this was his only chance for lasting fame. He could not let it go.

The plan was working . . . almost of its own inertia. He was alone. He was on the Moon, where no man had ever been before him. Not even Wayne. Wayne, who designed the rocket and guided it. Wayne, who had stolen every chance Thurmon had ever had for recognition! Well, Wayne was dead now. He had never put a living foot on the soil of the Moon. Only Thurmon had done that. And it was his passport to eternal glory! No one, *no one* could take that away from him! Weighed in the loaded balance of his mind, it more than compensated for dying alone and on an alien world. In fact, even the dying would add to the legends, and Thurmon would live forever. The first man on the Moon!

He ran his tongue over dry lips and stooped to pick up the thing at his feet. Wayne's corpse was still bloated from internal pressures, and the naked flesh was drying fast to a parchment-like consistency. Moisture was still seeping in awful little globules from the shattered skull where Thurmon's unseen blow had landed.

Thurmon found himself shuddering. The murder had been the hardest part . . . but now it was done . . . and all that remained was to give his dead companion a secret resting-place somewhere in the vast expanse of pumice that lay out there under the blistering sun.

Thurmon's unsteady mind swerved from high elation to sadness. Poor Wayne! He felt he could afford to be generous now. So many years of work so soon to be forgotten. Just one quick blow, and poor, poor Wayne slipped into the limbo of the Earth's forgotten . . .

Under the light gravity, he carried the naked, grisly bundle easily. And, as he walked out into the Mare Tranquilitatis,

his spirits rose again. How wonderful it was to be certain that no one could steal his triumph! Not even Wayne. Particularly not Wayne. He looked down at the thing in his arms and chuckled. The sound was uncanny within the pyrex bubble of his helmet.

After what seemed a long time, Thurmon stopped and set down his burden. With his pack-spade he set to work digging a trench in the pumice. As he dug, he found himself crooning happily to the corpse. His voice was high-pitched and hysterical, but of course he did not notice it.

"There, there . . . Wayne, old friend . . . see? I am making a grave for you. The very first grave, Wayne . . . and you shall have it, old friend! Yours the grave and mine the glory!" He laughed hilariously at the thought. "I'll say you didn't make it alive. You didn't, did you? But I made it, Wayne. *Me!* Alone . . . all alone! With no help from you, do you hear?"

Thurmon chattered on, the sound of his crazed voice dying within the confines of his helmet, while all around him the eternal silence of the Sea of Serenity continued unbroken. The stars shown steadily in the airless sky, and the sun flamed in impotent splendor, furiously silent.

At last the pit was done, and Thurmon lowered the nude corpse into the shadows. "Goodbye, Wayne. You see, you shouldn't have come here with me. You shouldn't

have tried to steal my success. That was a wrong thing. But you're sorry now, aren't you, old friend? Don't feel too badly, Wayne. I'll join you soon. Good-bye, Wayne. Goodbye . . ." Laboriously, he shoveled pumice into the pit and tamped it down with his leaded boots. Then he smoothed the surface of the dig until it was as smooth as the rest of the surrounding plain. Satisfied, he turned his back on the grave and started for the rocket.

He sang on the way back, so happy was he to have done with his ghastly companion. Recklessly prodigal of his oxygen supply, he ran toward the open valve of the ship. Breath coming hard, he stumbled into the rocket and across the buckled deck-plates to the radarphone. The tiny atomic batteries hummed as he removed the cadmium dampers. Power flickered the needles of the main set. Thurmon adjusted the selector to "relay" and tuned in his suit radio. Then he returned to sit in the open valve and call the monitoring station.

He smiled with satisfaction as the response cut through the blanket of hissing solar static.

"Hello! Hello, ES-1! This is White Sands! My Lord, we'd given you up for lost! Where are you?"

Thurmon took a steadier grip on his dancing mind and replied:

"Listen carefully. Carefully, you understand? This is John Thurmon. I am on

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the westernmost edge of the Sea of Serenity on the Moon. Wayne is dead . . . he didn't make it. Died during acceleration and I had to dispose of his body in space. Did you get that? I am alone here. The ship crashed on landing. I can't get back . . . but it's worth it! I haven't much time left . . . but I want everyone to know that I made it. It will be easier now for others . . . after I've pointed the way. I'm the first and it's worth it! Did you get that?"

There was a long silence. Finally, the radarman spoke respectfully. "Yes, Thurmon, we got that. Your transmission is being shunted onto the commercial bands. Can you tell us what you see up there? And . . . and Thurmon, we all want you to know that our prayers are with you." Tears were flowing on Earth now, Thurmon knew. Tears for a martyr to science doomed to death alone on an alien world. He smiled thinly. Even this tiny taste of deference and respect was heady wine to his frustrated psyche.

Thurmon stepped through the valve and lowered himself to the plain. His heart was pounding triumphantly. Carefully, painstakingly, he began to describe his surroundings, interspersing his words with scientific data. He played the hero well. There was no hysteria recognizable in his voice . . . and, if it trembled slightly, there was reason enough for that.

He rounded the bulge of the rocket's nose and looked for the first time at the western edge of the Mare. In the near distance an irregularly-shaped outcropping of rock caught his eye. Transmitting as he went, he made his way toward it . . . He drew nearer. And as he did, fear be-

gan to stir within him. His steps faltered, but some awful power drew him on. His voice became a shrill rasp in his ears, and on Earth a billion people gasped with horror . . .

"Wayne!"

Thurmon shouted the name in fear and threw his arm over his face. But the thing remained. It was *real*!

"Wayne . . . no! IT CAN'T BE! NO . . ."

But the figure did not move. The vast colossus loomed stark white and naked in the brilliant sunlight. Legs apart, arms folded on its breast, it stared with brooding eyes at the vast emptiness of the lunar plain.

Thurman howled with terror and fury.

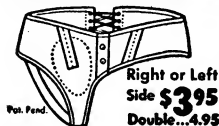
"Damn you! *Damn you!* Why don't you answer me? I killed you once . . . I'll kill you again! I'm the first one here! Do you hear me? I'll kill you again!"

He lowered his head and charged. The last thing he remembered was the soundless tinkle of his shattering helmet, and the terrible pain as his skull cracked under the suddenly shifting pressures . . .

" . . . And strangely enough, the story of the race's first conquest of space is the story of one man, Sargon, the Lemurian Immortal, who led his people to the Moon in the misty past of Earth's youth. The Lemurians are gone now, but on the westernmost edge of the Sea of Serenity there stands a statue of Sargon. It stands in magnificent isolation, a monument to the first man on the Moon."

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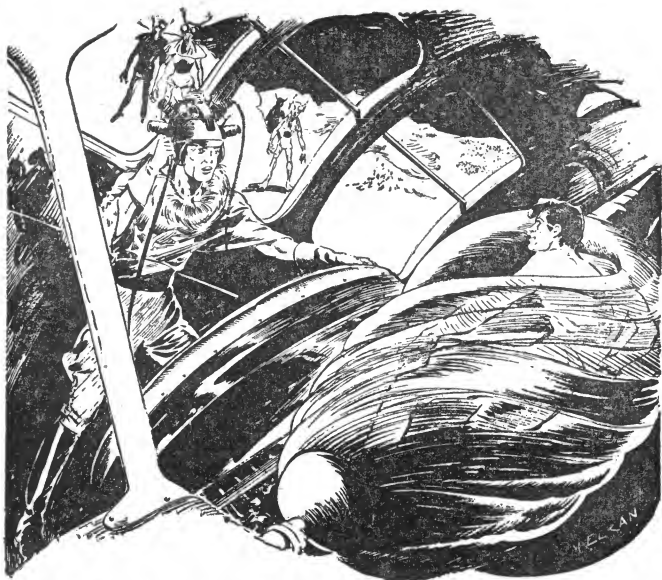
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I was at the mercy of a lunatic—and the Marties waiting outside!

MADMEN OF MARS

By ERIK FENNEL

Why do the Martians drink red wine, swagger about, spout vile poetry and fight endless duels with each other? How did Terence Michael Burke change their minds about invading the Earth?

ALL THIS TIME WE'VE KEPT quiet as a whole cageful of mice. And with good reason. During the Big Scare, while everyone was afraid that the Exclusion Ultimatum meant the Martians wanted an interplanetary war, the Earth Governments would have been only too ready to hang, shoot, stab, gas, electrocute, freeze, burn, poison, impale and/or defenestrate the dastardly culprits responsible. If they could have discovered who

did what to whom. They didn't savvy Marties then—and still don't.

But we are lucky. The Marties never explained why they called home their Cultural Emissaries, abandoned space travel, cut off Luminophone contact and excluded Earthmen and Earth ships from Mars. They couldn't, because they themselves weren't sure what had happened. And amid the confusion on Earth the last Mars transit of the spaceship *Banshee* escaped

official attention, which was largely due to Polly's good sense in making Mike see he'd better keep his big mouth shut. Our story would only have caused us trouble, even after the Scare died down.

All that was five years ago, but we still thought it best to keep still when this rather surprising diplomatic angling for resumption of Martio-Terran relations began just recently. The five of us were closer to what caused the Malignant Inertia Complex than all the big-name psychologists who have written books of wrong guesses since it disappeared, and we could see no danger of it starting up again. Mike was sure the Martian Thing had lost its grip. So we were willing to let the new treaty come up for a popular vote, as all interplanetary treaties must under the Earth Governments charter, without sticking our oars in or our necks out.

But last night Wild Bill Harrigan and I bumped into Miu Tlenow, a North Venus cat-man and veteran space-hopper who had just brought the Venusian diplomatic intermediaries from Mars to Earth for more treaty talks.

Naturally Bill and I were curious about what cooked on Mars. Tlenow talked, openly puzzled, while Bill and I looked at each other and remembered.

I'm not mad at anyone. Not even at the Thing. Mike swears the Thing meant no harm and the Cultural Emissaries couldn't help themselves, and I believe him. In fact I feel rather sorry for the poor Marties themselves. It must be tough on them to have to live with themselves, and each other.

The psychos would probably name the Marties' current condition Acute Virulent Mass Burke-itis and laugh it off. But the psychos don't know Mike as Bill and I do. So Bill insists it's our duty as Earth citizens to divulge everything, and I'm inclined to agree. The thought of a whole planetful of Marties obsessed with Mike's sense of humor is appalling.

Telling this really should be Mike's job—he's the only human who ever made contact with the Martian Thing—but he and Polly live at Venus Central now and the Professor is out there now visiting his

grandchildren, Mike, Jr. and Bridget Dorene. So I'm stuck. But I still think Bill ran in his own dice when we rolled to see which of us had to write this.

THE Malignant Inertia Complex started while we were in space and was already pretty widespread when Bill and Mike and I brought the *Banshee* in from a Venus haul, and during the three weeks we spent getting ready for the Mars transit and installing the Professor's latest special equipment I had the creeping geevils constantly. There was a sour, stagnant undercurrent to life in Spaceport City. For once the rowdy place was actually quiet, dead in fact, and although there were a dozen ships in, the Ursa Major Tavern was almost deserted.

Day and night the telaudio jabbered about the Complex, mostly learned doctors issuing statements that it was a purely psychological phenomenon, a sort of hysteria induced by this, that and the other factor in a civilization altering too rapidly for human minds to adjust.

Most of them followed the line that the disease would cure itself soon, but behind their seven-jet words they seemed a bit uneasy themselves. And I'll never forget the particularly learned gent who suffered an attack right in the middle of his broadcast speech. He was talking reassuringly when all of a sudden his voice petered out. His eyes got all glazed and his face took on an empty look, and he sat there staring at the mike until the control room cut him off. It gave me the shivers.

It was like that all over Earth. Each day more and more people got longer spells where they'd do absolutely nothing. It was raising the very devil with organized civilization and nobody could do anything about it. And the worst of it was that the victims didn't seem to mind. Everything was slowing down, and it made it plenty tough to do business with the outfits that furnished our supplies. People kept acting more and more like zombies—or Martians. But nobody thought of connecting the Complex with the Cultural Emissaries.

The whole thing hit me right in my pet phobia.

THEN it was blast-off morning, with me trying to keep my mind off my phobia and those nagging fears that had nothing to do with space-hopping. I cornered the Professor in the *Banshee's* control room.

"The power drain of this widget of yours has me worried," I complained. "The secondaries are already running overloaded."

As pilot-engineer, power was my responsibility.

Professor Tim Harrigan looked around, but not in his usual quick, birdlike way, and his eyes were dull.

"I'm sorry, Olsen." His voice sounded as though something were missing. "I haven't been able to reduce input requirements yet. The circuit changes keep eluding me."

Worms started squirming inside me. If the Professor, with his brilliant brain, were getting the Complex—

"Polly will tell Mike to be careful of power," he tried to reassure me.

Naturally Polly was scheduled to handle the ground end. She usually did whenever we were testing one of the Professor's inventions. In some ways she was more like a partner than a daughter to him. The set in the Professor's laboratory was rigged for her, while the Hustic aboard ship was adjusted to Mike's brain-wave pattern.

That's right. The thing we were going to test en route to Mars was the Harrigan Unimodulate Subetheric Telepathic Inter-spatial Communicator. Yes, I know that officially the Hustic wasn't invented until nearly a year later. Keeping it under wraps after what it did was one of our security measures. We were afraid someone might add two and two and get us hanged, shot, stabbed, defenestrated, etc.

That first set was a bulky, power-hogging, spit-and-solder job very different from the perfected, foolproof, universal-type transceivers that have now replaced the clumsy old Luminophones on all inter-planetary routes.

Terence Michael Burke, our red-headed astrogator, was standing as close to Polly as he could get, and from the gleam in his eye he was quoting some more of his

abominable romantic poetry at her. But she wasn't responding as usual. Not even blushing. She just stood there looking pale and wan, frozen up inside. Typical symptoms of the Complex, and it made me wince.

Mike looked around, missed something, and turned to me.

"Where'd you put my books?" he demanded.

"Cargo hold," I growled at him. "Had to use that space for the Hustic modulator."

"Barbarian squarehead!" he yelled.

"If you'd gas off to sleep like a human being—" I squawked right back at him. The Wilsons weren't warming yet, but already my nerves were tightening up in anticipation.

"Come on, Polly," he said. But she didn't follow him until he took her hand.

Mike was born in San Francisco, but he's a professional Irishman. Red Irish. And a prolifically lousy poet. Had a picture of himself as the spiritual descendent of Fin McCool and Francois Villon and Robin Hood and Sir Henry Morgan and all the other poet-adventurers and troublemakers of history. He was one of those romantics—and still is.

When he and Polly came back a few minutes later he had his bag of books under one arm, a smear of lipstick across his mouth, and a worried expression on his face. That was unusual. Ordinarily Mike was too slugnuttly to worry about anything. On Polly's much prettier countenance there was no expression at all. And that was all wrong.

Wild Bill, Professor Harrigan's younger but larger brother and skipper of the *Banshee*, came up from checking the drive room.

"Final tests," he said.

So we built up the secondaries until the whole ship howled and shrieked with their noise. Then when the needles came over without indicating radiation leakage we cut them to idling again.

Polly had snapped out of her daze and was clinging to Mike.

"I'm scared," she shouted in his ear, not realizing the noise had died. "Think nice thoughts to me on the Hustic, Michael

dearest."

Mike's arms tightened around her. "Of course, my one and only love, pearl of my universe and lodestar of my life. Every day."

I didn't like that "every day" stuff. I never approved of running secondary power packs to the limit. But before I could say anything Bill glanced at the chronometer.

"Clear out and dog down," he ordered.

Mike grabbed Polly and kissed her thoroughly, but she had gone back into her trance and he might as well have been kissing a rag doll. That was all wrong, too. She usually wasn't that way at all, not with Mike. Finally the Professor shook his head as though clearing away a mental fog, grabbed his daughter and led her out through the airlock.

Outside, at the edge of the spaceport, one of the Martian Cultural Emissaries was watching. Just watching. He wasn't excited or even particularly interested by the *Banshee* about to blast off for his home planet, as far as Bill and I could see as we tugged on the heavy circular door. Just standing there as though about to take root. That's all the three hundred Cultural Emissaries who had come in from Mars a few months before ever did. Stood around.

That's all the Marties did on Mars, too. The first Earthmen to ground on the Red Planet thought the Marties were incredibly dull and stupid because of their slow reactions. They began to change their minds after a few months contact, when the Marties copied our spaceships, adapting them to their own peculiar physical requirements, and displayed a disconcerting savvy in trading. But still their thoughts were alien, and we didn't understand them.

When the red hand touched fifteen Bill Harrigan was already in his cushions with a sleep mask over his craggy face. I envied him, but it was my turn to ride the chair out. Mike was in the other set of pneumatic cushions, but he hadn't gassed out. He grinned at me.

Then the red hand came straight up. I gritted my teeth and tripped the master throttle of the multiplex. The seven big

Wilsons hit with a soundless shock and the *Banshee* went out.

THE first few shifts were routine. Nasty, of course. The only pleasant part of spaceflight before the Halstead-Jenkins Mass Diminutors replaced Wilson drivers two years ago were the off-shifts when you could crawl into the cushions and turn on the sleep gas. Every sane and normal spacehand gassed out as much of the time as possible. It was safest.

For the Wilsons radiated supersonics with a frequency somewhere in the neighborhood of a fingernail scratching down a blackboard. Only amplified a million, billion, jillion stinking times.

That's why space wasn't crowded in those days, and why some of the earlier ships didn't come back. Wilsons did something to a man's nerves and emotions. A crew might be good friends on the ground, but that constant barrage of driver supersonics made them hate each other as long as they were in transit. Occasionally some poor guy would crack wide open, go spacebatty, and when that happened the victim almost always wanted to kill his crewmates and wreck the controls. Earplugs were useless, for you don't hear supersonics. They sneak in through your pores and get under your toenails and even come down through the hairs of your head. They get in everywhere.

Whenever the auto-timer cut the gas on me and I had to go on watch I always felt as though all the fiends of hell were digging at my nerves with red-hot power tools. I itched inside and couldn't get at the itches to scratch. But I was used to that.

THEN, on one of my watches, the meters showed a heavy drain on the secondaries. I wrote a note asking Mike to limit his test calls with the Husic, and then rewrote it six different times to keep it from sounding too nasty. That's how you get with Wilsons running.

On my next time up I found a sketch of myself wet-nursing the power packs fastened to the bulkhead, and an alleged poem that was mostly putrid puns. Mike's idea of humor.

Out of curiosity I put on the electrode-studded Hustic helmet and turned the set to receive.

Wham! Stars wheeled and comets fizzed and vague dark shapes glided and circled and balls of fire grew and exploded in showers of multicolored sparks.

I yanked the helmet off. But quick.

There's really no excuse for what I did then, except that I wasn't thinking clearly and ten days of supersonics will bring out all the petty meanness in anyone. And I thought that for once the Professor had missed the boat and the Hustic was a floperoo. It didn't bring in thoughts. Just stuff, and I wasn't going to have such a no-good gadget draining the power packs all the way to Mars and back. I forgot that first Hustic wasn't like a radio or these new universal models the space liners all carry. That experimental set had to be adjusted to the individual brain wave pattern of the operator. But I didn't remember that.

So I disconnected one of the power leads and removed three parts. A curved metal bar, a small condenser, and the shield of one of the intricate little tubes.

I went back to sleep thinking Mike would wake me to get the parts and we could write notes back and forth to settle the matter, forgetting entirely how stubborn he could be.

It was a dirty trick, but I'm glad now I did it. It helped save Earth.

BEFORE I was fully awake I knew something was really wrong. Mike was shaking me roughly and there was a wild gleam in his eyes. A glance showed me he'd pulled off Bill's sleep mask too.

"— — —!" Mike yelled, but of course I couldn't hear him. In those Wilson-drive spaceships it was utterly impossible to talk between blast-off and landing.

Then he shoved a pad under my nose. "MARTIANS TAKING OVER!!! EARTH IN DEADLY PERIL!!!" he had written.

Little slimy bugs with ice-cold, prickly feet marched up and down my spine. Every man has his private, personal phobia, something that throws him into an irrational panic, and mine has always

been lunatics. Ever since I can remember I've had a morbid fear of mental disorders, which is why the Malignant Inertia Complex had had me so thoroughly frightened. And now I knew the supersonics had driven Mike space-batty.

I didn't for a moment believe what he had written. I'd been to Mars before, seen Marties in their home environment, slow-moving and lethargic, entirely without initiative, completely unwarlike.

"DISCOVERED PLOT VIA HUSTIC," Mike scribbled.

The bugs on my spine quit parading and started running. I grabbed the pad.

"IMPOSSIBLE," I wrote. "HUSTIC NOT WORKING. NO GOOD. DISCONNECTED."

Mike dived across the cabin in the light gravity, hauled himself up neatly on a handgrip and raised the cover of the selector unit. Then he thumbed his nose at me.

Bill and I took a good look. That stubborn, crazy Irishman had made a new bar to replace the one I'd hidden and cut down an empty food can as a tube shield.

"GOT TO TURN BACK, WARN EARTH," Mike wrote. "THE CULTURAL—"

Bill and I looked at each other. Swinging a ship in mid-transit can be done, but it's hardly safe or good practice. Mike was no puny infant, and we knew we had to get him before he became really violent.

Mike read our faces and started to draw back, but he was too late. Bill pinioned his arms in a bear hug and I slipped a sleep mask over his face. He struggled and tried to hold his breath, but the gas got him at last and he went limp.

Sadly we loaded him into the pneumatic cushions and placed the air-release valve out of his reach. Few victims of space-battiness ever recovered, and both of us were feeling pretty sick. Mike had been space-hopping with us for three years, and despite his screwballisms we liked the big lug. And we knew Polly was going to take it awfully hard.

THE rest of that transit was twelve on and twelve off for Bill and me, and every minute I was awake I was afraid

I might follow Mike down Lunacy Lane. Or that he might get loose. A couple of times we brought him awake, but each time we were glad we'd turned extra air pressure into his cushions. He struggled, and by watching his lips we knew he was still raving.

The calculations for landing spiral made us sweat. We'd left the aströgration to Mike so completely we'd gotten rusty. We missed him even more making contact. I had to handle both throttles and calculator while Bill took the cumbersome Lumino-phone mechanism. It took hours to line up the color-modulated beam, and then in typical Martian fashion more hours for them to answer with a landing clearance. But at last the *Banshee* scrunched into the red desert just outside T'lith, and as the Wilsons died Bill and I wiggled our fingers in our ears to get them back to normal.

Within a few minutes a dozen Martians were striding toward us from the beehive-domes of their city. They came straight as though walking ruled lines, not hurrying and not lagging, semi-human in outline and size.

A couple of hundred feet from the ship they deployed and began to watch. Then we could see their bulging, faceted eyes, their puckered, three-lipped mouths and the two rodlike antennae that waved slowly back and forth on their greenish foreheads. We didn't know then why they watched, or who—or what—told them to watch. But always there were a dozen on hand whenever a spaceship landed, watching in a passive, detached way with neither approval nor disapproval in their manner. They watched, just as the Cultural Emissaries on Earth kept an eye on everything that happened without asking a single question or interfering in any way that we could see.

Bill opened the port and gobbled at the watchers in their own language, telling them we wanted to pick up a cargo of rhudite ore and had Earth gadgets to exchange. They didn't give any sign they heard us, but we didn't expect them to. The answer, if it came at all, would come minutes or even hours later. We didn't know why. Not then. We'd never heard

of the Thing.

Bill pulled his head in again, and while we waited we turned off Mike's sleep gas once more. This time we really had a faint hope that with the Wilsons off he'd be himself.

But his first words were, "Will you damned fools turn me loose? I'm not crazy! We've got to do something, and quick. Hell, I don't want to be like a damned Martie! They don't get any fun out of life."

He started to kick and squirm, so we gassed him out again. It seemed the only merciful thing to do.

"Olsen," Bill said thoughtfully. "We can't leave him alone and one of us has to rustle up a cargo."

"You're elected. You know the lingo better than I do."

"You don't mind?"

I snorted. I wasn't any first-tripper who had to go sight-seeing. The bleak domes of T'lith were no different from those of M'nu or V'rad or any of the other cities. And the Marties themselves weren't my idea of jolly companions.

So Bill packed the saddlebags of the little sandcycle and went sputtering off to question Marties about other Marties who might know of still other Marties who might know what *rhudite* was and perhaps with enough patient prodding might divulge some method for making a trade and getting the stuff to our ship. And each question would take ten minutes, minimum, for an answer. The three hundred Cultural Emissaries had been admitted to Earth on the theory that they might pick up Earth ideas that would facilitate trading. At least that's the story the peculiarly nebulous Martian government had given the Earth authorities.

After Bill left I checked Mike's pulse. It was weakening slightly from over-anaesthesia so, much as I dreaded having a lunatic awake in the ship with me, I had to let him recover consciousness.

He glared at me and fought against the pneumatic cushions that held him gently but tightly.

"You fool!" he raved. "You abysmal idiot! Don't you realize you're dooming Earth to an eternity of Martianization?"

It gave me a squirming feeling to hear him talk that way.

"There is no war," I said soothingly, trying to reason with him. "It's all in your head. If the Martians were attacking Earth it's only logical they'd jump on us here and now. But you'll snap out of it when we get you back home."

"It isn't that kind of a war," he insisted irritably.

FINALLY he calmed down. But his eyes, crazy and wild, kept following me around the room. That made me so nervous I went down and tinkered with the engines.

"Hey, Swede!" Mike's voice reached me after a while. "I'm thirsty."

So I brought him a drink and fed him a sandwich bite by bite.

"I'm okay now," he said when he had finished. "I know I blew my top, but I'm all over that. How's about turning me loose?"

I shook my head unhappily. He didn't even argue.

"Then how's about reading to me?"

"What would you like?" It was the least I could do for the poor fellow.

So I read some of Donn Byrne's things, stuff that looks like prose but is really poetry. Then he wanted Shakespeare's sonnets, but when I started reading he recited them from memory, his voice half a word ahead of mine.

He slept a while and later I fed him again. He seemed resigned now to staying in the cushions.

"How's about letting me try the Hustic again?" he asked. "The Professor wanted a planet-to-planet test, and the helmet cable will reach over here."

I hesitated and he glowered at me.

"I know that Martian stuff was all a delusion," he insisted. "I'm sane now, but if you don't let me prove it to myself once and for all I might go off the deep end again."

That got me. I wanted to be sure he had every chance.

"Put back the parts you took out," he directed.

I did. Then I stuck the helmet on his head and warmed the tubes.

"Send," he said. I flipped the switch up and he lay there concentrating.

"Receive," he said, his face taking on a *listening* expression.

"Tighten the chin strap, please," he asked. I did it.

"Send." More concentration.

"Receive."

A fatuous grin lifted across his face.

"It's Polly," he whispered.

That made me uneasy. I thought it was just another delusion. I'd tried the Hustic once and it hadn't worked at all.

"See," I said. "There aren't any Martians in there. They aren't making war on Earth."

"Stop interrupting," he snapped.

How much of what happened next was his own idea and how much he got from Polly I still don't know. For minutes at a time he'd *think* into the machine. Then I'd switch over and he'd lie there and grin. Finally he lay there *listening* so long and so quietly I thought he'd gone to sleep. I began to relax.

Then Mike screamed and I came out of my chair like a shot.

"Take it off! Take it off!" he shouted.

"The Martians are after me!" He shook his head but the helmet stayed on, held by the chin strap.

I cut the main switch and the tubes went dark.

"It's all right, Mike!" I yelled across his screaming. "It's off now!"

"No! No! No!" he gibbered. "They're coming through the helmet! Take it away! Take it away!"

I knew I had to get that helmet off, much as I didn't like getting near him. I reached for the buckle, but he kept whipping his head about so I had trouble catching it and had to bend over him.

Suddenly a long arm snaked around my neck and jerked me off balance. Then a ham-sized fist clipped my chin before I could even get my guard up.

WHEN I came to I was in the cushions with the air turned on full. The release valve wasn't in my hand where it should have been.

"Mike!" I yelled.

He put his tongue between his lips and

made a rude noise. He was patching the rubberized fabric of the other set of cushions, the ones in which he had been confined, and on his face was that wild look I had seen before when a good brawl was in prospect.

"Mike!" I pleaded. "You can't do this to me!"

"No? If Polly hadn't reminded me of this I'd be in there yet."

He held up the shamrock good luck pin Polly had given him, a little thing he kept pinned to his coveralls at all times. He had managed to unfasten it and puncture the pneumatic cushions.

But I had no good luck pin. I lay there helpless with all the stories I'd ever heard about the supernormal cleverness of lunatics running through my brain. I knew it would be three days, maybe four, before Bill returned. No chance of help from him.

Mike opened the Hustic case, whistling off key as he moved around, and replaced the original bar and tube shield and condenser with his homemade parts. Then he got to work on the bar with my delicate and expensive set of instrument files ruining them completely on the soft copper alloy.

"Be quiet, lunatic!" he barked every time I protested.

He spent hours filing on that bar, putting on the helmet and testing, then filing some more. And there was absolutely nothing I could do. He had so much air pressure in my cushions I couldn't even squirm.

At last he tested once more, and this time snapped the set off almost at once with a smile of satisfaction.

Next he started tracing the secondary power circuits, but he didn't get very far. Every time the Professor had come up with a new idea we had rewired the *Banshee*, running new leads through the bulkheads but leaving the old circuits in place. The original wiring diagrams were nothing but propaganda by now, with the up-to-date dope all in my head and Bill's.

I must have been getting hysterical from being pinned there so helplessly with a lunatic at large, for when he got into the metal rat's nest behind the meter panel I laughed. Then I wished I hadn't.



"Swede," he said earnestly. "I want to double the voltage and step up the amp-erage by eight on the direct current. I want the frequency of the AC boosted to at least 850 cycles, and I need at least two thousand ehrenhafts on the magnetic flux leads."

I blinked at those figures.

"Now Mike," I said, trying to be calm. "Let me out of here and we'll talk this over." I had my eye on a heavy wrench I hoped I could grab in time.

"Oh no, Swede. You're insane. I couldn't possibly let you loose."

He chuckled at his own stupid joke. "Tell me how to rig it," he demanded.

"No soap. That much overload would probably blow the packs and the whole ship with it."

"That's a chance we'll have to take. For all Earth's sake," he said, really serious this time. "There's no other way. Now tell me."

I shook my head.

Instead of arguing he got out a soldering iron and started it heating.

"You scared of me?" he asked ominously.

"No, Mike. Of course not. We're ship-mates." But it was a lie, a damned big lie. He knew it and I knew it, and I knew that he knew it.

He touched a wet forefinger to the iron. It sizzled.

"My!" he said, sounding like the smooth menace from some telaudio spooky-show. "What a nice red nose you're going to have—if you don't start talking!"

"Mike!" I begged. "You can't do that

to me! We're old friends! Remember?"

But he did it. The tip of the iron on the tip of my nose, and it hurt. I yowled, mostly in utter panic rather than pain. My phobia was working overtime.

"Enough?" he asked. "I'll keep it up if I have to."

I thought it over. Crazy as he was, he might throw a dead short across the secondaries. Fission packs won't stand that without exploding. So I talked. Once I tried to give him a bum steer that would cut down the current, but he sensed it and waved the soldering iron at me again.

When he had all the dope he needed he took time out to smear ointment on my nose. It made me look cross-eyed and I still wanted to touch the burn, but he refused to reduce the pressure even enough for me to work one arm loose.

"Sorry, Swede," he chuckled. "It's for you're own good. You're insane, so I can't take chances."

"Me?" I bellowed, for a moment forgetting even my blistered nose. I called him several names.

Mike laughed—like crazy.

"Now to get Bill back here. We'll even leave the port open for him."

I thought that was good, until he removed a tank of sleep gas from its brackets and dragged it to the entry.

"You can't reach Bill on the Hustic," I reminded him. "Use the radio."

"And let him know who's making like a caterpillar in a cocoon?" Once more I thought of the supernormal cleverness of lunacy.

He made some painstaking adjustments on the Hustic and flicked the changeover switch to *send*.

Through the open port I could see three of the Marties watching the Banshee. If they'd been humans I'd have yelled for help, but with Marties I'd have been wasting my breath.

Mike kept stepping up the power. His lips were tight and his eyes squinted in concentration. And then I saw one of the Marties move. Actually make an aimless movement. He shifted from one foot to the other. The second turned his hand from side to side as though uneasy. The third took a few steps back and forth. And

Martians just didn't act like that.

"Secondary effects," Mike grunted. "I'm not tuned on them, but the wave spills over."

"Huh?"

Mike didn't answer. He just sat there *thinking* into the Hustic.

AN HOUR passed that way. Then I heard a sound like a whole forest full of infuriated parrots. It came from the direction of T'lith, and it grew louder by the minute.

Mike looked up. "Bill should be here soon."

He was right. I heard the sandcycle, and then the squeal of its brakes below the entry port.

"Olsen!" Bill was yelling as he scrambled in. "Hell is loose out there! The Marties—"

"Look out!" I yelled, but too late. Bill was panting and didn't have a chance to hold his breath as Mike slapped the sleep mask over his face. Mike caught him as he fell and loaded him into the other cushions.

There must have been at least a hundred green-skinned Marties milling about outside. They'd followed Bill from T'lith and they were really milling in a most un-Martian fashion.

"What have you done, Mike?" I cried then I understood what the word "aghast" really means. That's what I was. Aghast.

Mike slammed and dogged the port, but even through the insulated hull I could hear the uproar outside.

Bill opened his eyes, gave me one look of utter disgust, and started struggling.

"Mike!" he roared. "Get us the hell out of here! Turn me loose! All the Martians have gone crazy! They chased me, damn it!"

Mike just grinned, but tensely.

"You let me out of here at once!" Bill bellowed. "Damn it all, this is mutiny!"

"Oh no," Mike protested. "I'm not responsible. I'm crazy. You put it in the log that way yourself."

Wild Bill's face went purple. "Then blast us out of here yourself, before they kill us all," he yammered. "You were right! They're on the warpath!"

"No!" Mike refused flatly. "I'm not finished yet."

Bill's language grew luridly unprintable, and when he refused to quit shouting Mike finally gassed him out again.

Then he went back to the Hustic. Mostly he kept it on *send*, but every few minutes he'd flip over to *receive* for just a second or two. Then he'd make another infinitesimal adjustment.

Once he froze in his chair. One of his arms was half raised and it stayed that way, unnaturally motionless. He looked like a statue—or a Martie—or someone who had the Malignant Inertia Complex.

"Mike!" I yelled, more frightened than ever.

He shook his head dizzily and flipped the witch out of the *receive* position.

"Thanks, Swede," he said. "That Thing almost had me that time, but now I've got it."

He twisted the power knob full over. The transformers howled under the overload. He jammed the helmet down more firmly on his head and stood up, staring blankly at the bulkhead as though looking through the solid steel.

"Listen, Thing!" he growled.

I shivered. Sheer lunacy.

"Get every thought and word of this! You will cease interfering with Earth immediately—or I'll blow Mars and you both clear out of the universe!"

Paranoia, I thought, delusions of grandeur. Somehow this was worse than anything that had gone before, though that had been bad enough.

"I can blast Mars out of the Universe at will—and if there is any further interference with Earth minds I shall do so. You are afraid of me!"

"Now get this, Thing. All of it. Individuality, the freedom of independent, individual action, is the right of every living creature! That includes Martians as well as Earthmen.

"You are going to stop being what you have become. You will make no more decisions for anyone. You will become once more what you were intended to be, a source of information only. You will make no more decisions, dominate no more

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activities, and will give out information only when it is requested.

"You will forget entirely the ideas with which you have become imbued, particularly the idea that the elimination of all activity not absolutely essential for survival is the goal of existence.

"Here is the data which you will release to all Martians upon their mental request. But you will release it as information only and will not make their decisions as to conduct."

Then, while the Martians jabbered and howled outside the *Banshee*, while Bill snored away in one set of shock cushions and I lay pinned helplessly in the other set, Terence Michael Burke stood with the Hustic helmet on his head and recited from memory all the poetry he had ever written—and there was a lot of it. Too much, and all of it highly emotional. Most of it was about either romantic love or epic battles, or both.

When that was finished he began to read every scrap of printed matter we had aboard, even the astrogration tables and a set of seven place logarithms. I hadn't realized until then what a complete but heterogeneous library Mike had managed to stash away in various nooks and crannies around the ship. There were volumes of history and treaties on economic theory, some drama, a textbook on psychology, a cockeyed work on ethical thought. Then he dragged out my standard engineering references, including the manuals on Wilson drivers and fission power-pack operation.

After that he got into the novels, and I think that's what did most of the damage. Most of them were either wild adventure stuff or incurably romantic, and almost all of them had been written by Irishmen who saw the world in a keyed-up and highly emotional way, just as Mike himself did. Naturally there was a complete set of Donn Byrne's works, for Mike swore that Byrne was the greatest writer who had ever lived.

And there was a reprint of something called **WARLORD OF MARS**, written by a fellow named Burroughs way back in the days before spaceflight. When the novels were exhausted there came a bunch of science-fiction magazines, mostly the copies of **PLANET STORIES** he had missed while we were out on that long Venus haul.

Finally there was a newspaper we'd brought aboard at the spaceport just before blast-off. He read it page by page and column by column, including the advice to the lovelorn section, the comics, the editorials, and all the ads. His voice droned on for hours, while the Hustic transformers whined and the air in the ship misted with the acrid fumes of overheated insulation and I soaked myself in cold sweat. The whole scene had the irrationality of a nightmare. But I was awake and knew it, and just wished I were dreaming the whole thing.

THEN, inevitably with that overload, the Hustic spouted black smoke. The line surge that flashed back up the cables bent the meter needles around their stop pegs, and down in the belly of the ship the power packs sizzled and crackedled. But somehow they didn't explode.

Mike staggered and covered his face with his hands. He dropped to his knees and for an instant I thought the current had followed the helmet cable and electrocuted him.

But he grasped a stanchion and pulled himself upright. His face was haggard and gaunt, but there was a wildly triumphant gleam in his bloodshot eyes and a twisted grin on his lips.

Then I got my worst scare of all as he lurched toward me, fumbling in his pocket

for the spring-opening knife he always carried. I closed my eyes and waited for the end.

But he didn't stab me. Instead the air swooshed out of my cushions as he ripped the fabric. Then he turned and yanked the sleep mask from Bill's face.

I scrambled out. My legs felt rubbery from being pinned in the cushions so long but I managed to stagger over and twist Bill's air release valve just as Mike crumpled to the deck.

Bill opened his eyes. "What the—?"

Then he remembered what had happened, and heard the Marties still howling outside in a most unpleasant way.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" he bellowed.

We went out with Bill on the throttles and me down in the drive room with the portable emergency power pack and a handful of wires to get the Wilsons firing. Mike was out cold on the control room floor. We went out with a swish and a swoop on an uncontrolled skew curve, and only the low .38 gravity and 3.1 mile per second escape velocity of Mars kept us alive.

As soon as we straightened out of the escape spiral Bill and I hustled Mike into the cushions. It wasn't necessary to gas him, for although he had recovered consciousness he did not resist at all. Instead he fell into a long normal sleep, twice around the clock as though completely exhausted.

That trip still haunts my nightmares. Everything powered off the secondaries—which meant nearly everything but the main drivers—was dead. Mike had really fixed that.

Then one of the Wilsons burned a liner, and with grave misgivings we had to turn Mike loose. We didn't like the notion of spacing a trajectory on power settings plotted by a crazy man, but the calculations for unbalanced drive needed his astrogating skill. With the mechanical astroplotter out of action it was too much for Bill and me.

He didn't get violent, so after that we gave him the run of the ship, though of course we never left him on watch alone. He seemed harmless enough, and spent

most of his time at a typewriter he had rebuilt to operate in variable gravity. He wrote a few poems to and about Polly. The usual mush.

Then he wrote a story. Maybe I've mentioned before that he collected rejection slips. Bill and I laughed when we read it, because it was much too far-fetched for publication. All about a mysterious artificial brain—he didn't specify whether animal, vegetable or mineral—invented to serve as a combination integrating calculator and reference library, working on a form of telepathy. But the creatures for whom it was built kept using it more and more to solve their problems instead of working them out for themselves. After a few generations the creatures became nothing but eyes and hands for the brain, letting it do all their thinking and make all their decisions.

And because the Thing was aware of every sensation of a whole planetful of creatures it grew very tired of processing irrelevant information and began to propagate the idea that any thought or action not absolutely essential for survival was wrong and should be suppressed, and that emotions—which interfered with transmission of factual data—were unthinkable degenerate, to be shunned at all costs. After a few more generations the creatures did not even realize they were being controlled by the Thing, had even forgotten its existence and believed its thoughts and decisions were their own.

That was the story.

Then he got to fooling with the burned-out ruins of the Hustic and made a sheaf of graphs, all in five and six colors. They were too complex for Bill or me.

A few days out from Earth, a worried Bill got me up in the middle of my off-shift and motioned to the forward viewport. There, coming toward us from the inviting blue-green ball of Earth, were thirty closely grouped orange specks. Spaceship driver flares.

Mike took a look too, then held both hands to his forehead with index fingers protruding and wiggled them at us. When I got the idea I wasn't happy about it. The wiggling fingers meant antennae.



Martians.

Bill and I gnawed our fingernails. The poor *Banshee* could neither run nor fight. But the Martian ships went right on by without even trying to contact us on the Luminophone. Mike just grinned through it all.

WE landed rough, on account of the burned-out driver, but when things stopped bouncing we were all in condition to limp away.

Mike saw the car pull up outside and had the hatch open before we could stop him.

Polly met him with open arms and a kiss that would have been censored on any teltaudio show. She wasn't the pale, subdued, inertia-ridden girl of a few months before. Not at all.

The Professor was dancing up and down with excitement behind her, trying to shake one of Mike's hands.

"You did it, darling!" Polly released her lips long enough to say. "They're gone, every one of them! And so is the

Complex."

"Huh?" Bill and I stared.

Then Bill grabbed his brother.

"You mean Mike isn't—?" he began.

"Of course not," the Professor snapped. "He never was." Then he turned to Mike.

"What capacitance were you using when you picked up the Thing's radiations?" he demanded. "What power factor? What wave form? Sine wave or flat top or sawtooth? Did you have the transportation grid shielded or were you getting a reinduction feedback?"

"Father!" Polly said sternly. "Later!"

Mike reached in his pocket and handed his fancy graphs to the Professor, who seemed to understand them at a glance.

"Oh," he said. "There's just enough similarity of wave form here so the telepathic inertia influences directed at the Cultural Emissaries would heterodyne in their receiving organs and be re-emitted exactly on a generalized human brain wave pattern.

"And that makeshift capacitance bar you rigged just happened to sensitize the set to the Thing's own wave form."

We listened, but right then Mike was more interested in Polly. About that he displayed good sense.

BILL'S *Banshee III* and my *Thor* are between-trips at the same time, so it was only natural that we got together last night. And when we met Miu Tlenow, the Venusian cat-man, it was also natural that we head immediately for the Ursa Major Tavern.

"Mewargh!" Tlenow purred, extending and retracting his clawlike fingernails with pleasure as the second drink took hold. "Really it is good to get away from that madhouse."

"What madhouse?" Bill asked.

"Mars."

We sat up straighter. Somehow in the five years that had passed without authentic news from the Red Planet we had taken it for granted that things there had settled down once more to a slow, lethargic normality. We hadn't realized the full impact

of Mike, as amplified by the Hustic.

"Those Martians!" Tlenow mewed, his whiskers twitching in agitated disgust. "They are crazy. All crazy. They mate, but they use no sense in how they mate. Like Earthmen. Such complications! They have many different governments with a hundred different political parties, and they talk and talk, vote and vote. They argue.

"Things like Earthmen's gloves they make. Of course they will not fit Martian hands and they carry them only to hit in each other's faces. Then they fight duels.

"They make liquor and drink it, and how crazy-drunk they get. Then, Great Space, they even try to sing!

"They make jokes and play pranks, too, something they never did before."

Tlenow was slit-eyed with amazement at such illogical Martian behavior.

"They do this one day, do that the next. Always they grow more like Venusians or Earthmen, only with not so much sense. What they will do on any tomorrow one can never tell."

He finished his drink and leaned forward.

"They make writing—too much writing—everything in writing—and all of it funny kind. What you Earthmen call—I think—poetry. Yes, that is it. Poetry. And each day gets worse. They never make like that before. By the Seven Black Comets, how they get that way?"

That was when Bill and I knew we had to break our silence.

SO THE Marties have not yet learned to think for themselves. Five years, after all, is a very short time. Perhaps some day. In the meantime they're nothing but reflections of the more uninhibited and generally screwy aspects of Terence Michael Burke's personality. And I'm afraid they'll share his disturbing ideas of humor.

Do we want anything to do with them? Frankly, I don't know. That's up to you, Citizens of Earth, when you vote on the new treaty.

But don't say I didn't warn you.



They were next. Could they evade the atomic torpedoes?

WHO GOES THERE?

By CHARLES H. DAVIS

Hurting down from cold and hostile space, battle-worn Ekrado and Ronaro gazed with joy at the lovely watery world below. Here, surely, they would find friends—and the precious help they needed!

THROUGH THE OUTER LIMITS of our solar system, two great ships flashed through the void. Light from distant Sol gleamed feebly on their dark hulls, paled to insignificance by the flare of pure energy that blasted each ship through space at inconceivable velocity. Sol's illumination was just enough to pick

out the jagged gash near the base of the leading vessel where a force beam had struck a deadly blow.

As the interval between the spaceships lessened, a pale beam lanced out from the pursuing ship and caught the wounded Alarian cruiser on the flank. Mighty steel plates buckled inward and life-giving wat-

er spouted out through the torn side to freeze instantly in the terrible cold of the void. As the pressure dropped, razor-edged bulkhead doors shot automatically into place to seal off the stricken compartment.

Although badly damaged, the Alarian ship was not yet out of the fight. Number Five turret lashed back with a heat ray that glowed cherry-red, then white, on the upper forward turret of the pursuing ship of Ru'ukon. A cluster of atomic torpedoes darted from the far side of the Alarian ship and headed for the Ru'ukonian cruiser in an intricate series of zig-zag maneuvers, only to be caught half way by a force beam and exploded in a blinding flash. Another single torpedo, swinging wide through space in an arc hundreds of thousands of miles long, came up from behind the pursuing ship. For a moment it seemed that it might strike a vital blow, but the Ru'ukonian detection apparatus went into action at the last possible moment and the single torpedo was caught by a force beam when it was but a scant hundred miles from its target.

Again the pale beam struck, and the Alarian ship staggered as the Number Two port engines exploded.

In the control room, a squid-like shape churned through the clear water to the vision screen where Ekrado, the ship's commander, floated.

"Yes, Ronaro," his thought was sharp and urgent, "what is it?"

"Number Two port engine out," telepathed his deputy. "Number One turret out."

"That is bad. Prepare our personal lifeboat for immediate use. It may become necessary to abandon ship."

"Right away," acknowledged Ronaro. But even as he turned to carry out the order, Ekrado caught the indication of a half-formed question in his mind.

"You have doubts, Ronaro," he challenged. "Out with them."

"If we abandon ship now, how can we carry our message?"

"We have no choice; this ship will never carry us to distant Alar. Our communication apparatus is wrecked beyond repair. We must contact a civilized race

on one of the planets of this sun and win their cooperation—or Alar will never get our message."

"Never get our message!" echoed Ronaro, shocked.

"Don't float there thinking of failure. We must and will succeed. Now, off to the lifeboat. I'm going to try to dodge behind a planetary body of this system."

The Captain gave the orders for a change of course, and the speeding ship turned on a long arc as it swung its bow in towards the center of the planetary system. The maneuver gained them a brief respite, as the Ru'ukonian swept on past before the pilot could react to the change of course. The superior speed of the other cruiser soon told, however, and the Alarian ship rocked again as another beam struck it.

An excited subordinate swam up, waving his five tentacles frantically. "Captain," he telepathed, "the water-purifying plant has been hit. A beam went right through where Number Five turret used to be. The auxiliary plant was knocked out when Number Two engine exploded.

"We'll abandon ship," decided the Captain. "Some of the lifeboats should reach planets. Set the controls to plunge the ship into the sun of this system."

THE junior officer made the necessary adjustments to the controls. With a flick of one tentacle he set the automatic alarm broadcaster into action and swam hastily after his Captain. The metallic command, "Abandon Ship! Abandon Ship!" rang through his mind as the device started functioning.

The Captain was already at the controls of the lifeboat. Ronaro dove after him. A moment later the lifeboat had slipped through the lock into space, darting away from the wounded giant at full speed.

"Several small planets held by this star, Captain," reported Ronaro.

"I see them," telepathed Ekrado. "You keep a watch on the enemy and look to see if any other lifeboats escape. I'll steer for the most likely planet."

As Ronaro watched through the rear-view vision screen, first one and then another darted away from the Alarian hulk

until he could count a total of five.

"Rendezvous instructions?" asked Ronaro mentally.

"Third planet from the sun," ordered Ekrado. "We're in luck, Ronaro, the planet is mostly water—plenty of room to swim around in. I'll pick one of the ocean areas to land in and inform the other boats by beacon signals of our exact location."

Even as Ronaro adjusted the communication amplifier to direct his mental command to the scattered lifeboats behind them, a more ominous picture appeared on the screen. The bright red halo that warned of approaching atomic torpedoes blossomed forth on the image of the enemy cruiser. The single halo gradually broke into smaller red circles as the cluster spread apart in space.

"Space torpedoes coming," he reported tersely.

"Six, of course," replied the Captain.

"Right." It was the standard size cluster.

"How many lifeboats besides ourselves?"

"Five."

"Then we're the sixth."

"Right."

"Any of them driving toward the cruiser itself?"

"No, their guiding mechanisms must be set for small-sized craft. They'll track every one of us down."

"A torpedo is heading directly for us now," reported Ronaro.

"At least one boat must get through to carry our message," stated Ekrado flatly.

"What do you propose—a sacrifice?"

"Set the heat ray projector for a narrow fan beam and slice the nearest lifeboat into two parts," ordered the Captain.

Ronaro's tentacles fairly boiled the water as he made the necessary adjustments. A thousand miles behind them, the closest lifeboat from their stricken vessel glowed briefly around its equator and fell apart into two halves that gradually spread apart.

"Two hundred years ago, in the Second Gruon War, I saw my best friend die in just such a sacrifice," grated Ekrado. "I did not like it then and I do not like it now. It was not an easy order to give."

Without replying, Ronaro watched the

vision screen anxiously. His eyes were on the bright red halo that warned of a torpedo speeding toward their own lifeboat. There was an additional, separate metal object in space now, toward which the sixth torpedo might automatically be guided by the mechanism in its nose. Blinding flashes lit up the vision screen as one lifeboat after another was destroyed. Now only two torpedoes were left, one heading toward them, and then other toward the lifeboat that had been split in half. At last, the torpedo bearing on them deviated from its course as its guiding mechanism sensed the nearer metal bulk of the nearer half of the lifeboat. The two flashes appeared as one as the two torpedoes blasted both halves of the sacrifice into nothingness.

"All six exploded," reported Ronaro. "The enemy cruiser is veering off to return to base. We are safe!"

The little boat sped on until finally it was screaming through the thin upper air of Earth. Ekrado sharply decreased their speed to prevent over-heating the hull, having no desire to be cooked alive in the water of his own lifeboat.

BELOW them, covering the horizon, was the vast expanse of the Atlantic. The two Alarians were joyous at the sight of such a planet. Here was no dried-up world, such as some they had seen where old age or the heat of a nearby sun had dried up the life-giving waters. Ekrado sent the little craft straight down toward the blue expanse below.

Water shot high into the air like a geyser as the alien lifeboat plunged into the ocean. Deep under the water's surface, the craft leveled off and slowed until it drifted idly.

"Take an instrument reading," ordered Ekrado. "Let us see what kind of a hydrosphere this planet has. It looks good enough."

"It is not as good as it looks," reported Ronaro grimly. "The temperature and pressure are satisfactory, but the chemical content of the water is poisonous. It would kill us in a few minutes."

"That means we must depend on our water purifying plant as long as we are

on this planet—or as long as it holds out. They aren't built to last forever."

"We must get word to Alar that the entire Ru'ukonian fleet is attacking without warning, while our fleet is at the other end of the galaxy holding maneuvers. Maneuvers! A yachting trip for the Lord Admiral Krukun, while Alar lies almost defenseless!"

"You stated before that our only hope was to contact a civilized race on one of these planets, in hopes that they might have interstellar communication apparatus?"

"Yes," responded Ekrado, "or any type of equipment for broadcasting radiation. We can rebuild it for our purpose. Have you forgotten that we served one hundred and sixty years together in the Communications Corps? We could rebuild anything, just so they have the power."

"I believe we could," replied Ronaro, caught by his Captain's enthusiasm.

"Right! Our first step must be to find intelligent life on one of the planets of this sun. We must start by searching the waters of this world."

Ekrado threw the throttle-lever forward slightly and the ship moved ever more rapidly through the water. Straight ahead he drove it while the two Alarians concentrated every attention on the vision screens in the hope of sighting intelligent life.

Life they saw aplenty in the next few hours, much of it strange but the greater part of it similar to that of their own world.

"Ronaro, look," telepathed Ekrado excitedly, "a being like an Alarian."

Across the vision plate floated a pointed body sprouting a tangle of flexible arms at one end. Hope surged high in them both.

"Wonderful," exulted Ronaro, "probably we've found intelligent life already. Probe his mind, Ekrado."

"No response yet," replied the Captain, "possibly they use some other method of communication."

"Such as signals or audible sounds," suggested Ronaro.

"Yes. In that case, it would be difficult to establish contact."

"Very difficult to transmit our thoughts, but not so difficult to read his."

"Well, it has been done before, with non-telepathic races."

"Like the giant rays of Ikraa."

"Let me concentrate, Ronaro."

The two Alarians drifted in telepathic silence, Ekrado closing his eyes and concentrating his mental efforts at reaching the alien mind. Ronaro studied the creature as it swam unconcernedly past searching for food.

"Hunts his food in primitive fashion," he reflected silently, careful not to destroy Ekrado's concentration. "Apparently his people do not have shellfish farms. Or possibly he is simply hunting for the fun of it or in order to be alone. He has twice as many tentacles as an Alarian, but mere physical difference proves nothing. He is wearing no harness or ornamentation of any kind, nor is he carrying a weapon. Obviously a low level of culture, if any."

"You try," ordered the Captain, relaxing. "I've concentrated until my brain-case almost burst and achieved nothing."

"I'm afraid I'll have no better luck," said Ronaro. Swiftly, he reported his observations to his Captain.

Nonetheless, Ronaro also tried to contact the stranger. He had, perhaps, better luck than his Captain, but his mind found only primal impulses, not thoughts. There was hunger there, more like greed to the refined sensitiveness of the Alarian, and a great fear that at the moment lay dormant and formless. There wasn't even the faintest stirrings of curiosity toward their boat. In fact, his probing mind could not even find a specific identification of the lifeboat in the thing's mind.

"Ugh," he shuddered, "completely undeveloped. A beast."

Ekrado frowned mentally. "You must have done better than I, at least. I found only nothingness."

"You must have been looking solely for intelligence," Ronaro hastened to reassure his Captain. "There was none to find. Only primitive emotions."

Silently, Ekrado started the lifeboat on its long sweep through the waters. At the end of a hundred miles, he turned in a slow curve and headed back along a

straight line parallel to the way they had come. Back and forth they combed through the blue-green water, systematically hunting some sign of intelligent life.

DURING this period, they several times encountered creatures similar to that which they had first thought might like themselves. Each time hope rose again; and each time it came to nothing. Each such creature inspired in them a strange medley of emotions, a sense of kinship and yet of repugnance, a feeling at once of benevolence toward a more backward cousin mixed with exasperation.

After the futile search had gone on for several hours, Ronaro was struck with a sudden idea.

"Perhaps the intelligent races of this planet are deep-sea creatures," he suggested.

"It's possible," mused Ekrado. "So far I've been cruising pretty much at our own favorite depth."

"This lifeboat can stand tremendous pressure."

"We'll try it," decided Ekrado. The slender shape of the lifeboat wheeled over until it was pointing straight down toward the ocean bottom.

Soon there was a gradual change in the color of the water, fading from green to greenish blue and then to dark blue. Ronaro snapped on the searchlights at the Alarian equivalent of 700 feet and the yellow beams spread out into the dark blue waters on all sides. The pressure gauge showed them an ever increasing force pressing on all sides of their vessel, until, at 1700 feet, it had reached 770 pounds per square inch. At this level the water was as black as space itself. The beams from their searchlights had changed in color from yellow to a luminous gray bordered along each side with dark blue. Sprinkled through the blackness were the lights carried by many deep-sea fish. The two Alarians studied the vision screens with tense concentration. Fish swam through their light beams and were gone again in an instant in the surrounding blackness. Groups of lights moving through the darkness told them of large fish or schools of smaller fish, but they

were unable to trace the outlines from the pattern of lights.

"We should be near bottom, by now, if this were Alar," commented Ronaro at 3000 feet.

"The waters of this planet may well be deeper than those of our home world," pointed out Ekrado.

Both of them looked at the pressure gauge. At the Alarian equivalent of 1358 pounds per square inch, it was not far from the red line that indicated the maximum pressure the lifeboat could stand. But still they kept going down through the ice-cold blackness.

"Look Ekrado!" clamored Ronaro. "The God Ka!"

It was not, indeed, the God Ka, but it might well have been. Its body alone was five times the size of their life-boat and its tentacles stretched for an unknown distance, far beyond the rays of their feeble lights. It brooded motionless in the inconceivable pressure, as though watching them, although it had no trace of eyes.

Both Alarians concentrated their minds on the problem of communication with the tremendous mind they knew was contained within that mighty bulk. They both floated motionless, eyes closed, concentrating. But while the Alarians were motionless, the thing before them was not. A great tentacle wrapped itself around the hull. As the tentacle tightened in its body-crushing embrace, it encountered unexpected resistance in the hard metal of the hull. Even as the two Alarians were beginning to face their disappointment at what they had found, or what they had not found, that unexpected resistance registered within the brain of the giant squid. The dull surprise and heavy anger that flared within the primitive mind warned the two Alarians of their danger.

As they became aware once more of their immediate surroundings, one vision screen was completely covered by the width of one huge tentacle wrapped around their ship, while the other showed several more tentacles drawing near to enfold their life-boat. The upper part of the hull, the roof of their cabin, bulged inwards, while the hull groaned and creaked as though every plate and bar was about to collapse.

"Quick, Ronaro, the heat cannon," snapped the Captain as he dove for the controls.

The motors hummed vainly as Ekrado sought to free the craft from the monster's grip. At the same time, Ronaro brought his sights to bear on the approaching tentacles. The tight beam sliced through them as fast as he could bring it to bear; one, two, three, four . . . But not fast enough, for one more tentacle closed around the lifeboat. By chance, the monster had blotted out their vision screen with the second tentacle. Now Ronaro was fighting blind. He set the angle of fire in such a way that the cannon would fire close to the life-boat's hull. He fired again and again, as fast as the weapon built up potential for another discharge, systematically combing the waters around them. The pressure on the hull relaxed almost visibly as the tentacles that held the ship were sliced in two at last by the heat ray. But since Ronaro could not set the weapon to actually graze the hull, the end of the severed tentacle remained wrapped around them to obscure the vision ports.

The monster was not defeated yet. Even with six tentacles gone, it had four left, and Ronaro was still fighting blind. His rays bombarded the water blindly in the hope of striking the body of the giant. At the same time, the lifeboat got slowly under way, rising sternwards toward the surface. As it gathered momentum, Ekrado spun it over, to travel bowfirst. The turn dislodged the severed tentacles and once again the two Alarians could see into the dark water as far as their light beams could illuminate it. There was no sign of the monster. Whether they had outrun it or outfought it, they did not know, but in any case they were safe.

"That idea did not turn out any too well, did it?" commented Ekrado wryly.

Ronaro did not reply, for the statement hardly called for an answer. The two Alarians floated in silence while the lifeboat climbed back toward the lighter surface waters once more.

HIGH above them a United States destroyer was cutting through the ocean swells, part of a great convoy that

spread over many miles of water. In the center of the convoy were the troop ships, surrounded by a screen of other destroyers.

On the bridge the captain and his executive officer were chatting desultorily. Their eyes scanned the waters constantly while they talked, a sea-borne custom that long antedated the ship's bristling radar screens. "If we put in anywhere along the Solomons," the captain said, "I'll bet we'll see the natives still wearing and using the old equipment—from forty-five."

"Yeah," grinned the exec. "They all say it was the Navy that ruined the Pacific."

"Huh," snorted the other. "We went ashore—but the Army stayed ashore. Whatever you find will be Government Issue."

The exec yawned. "Cripes, what a boring tour. I'd give my last bottle for just one sight of a good old Nip periscope."

"Or a Kamikaze," growled the captain sarcastically.

A radioman stepped out on the bridge, saluted, and handed the captain a flimsy. He read it, and frowned at the exec.

"Lead ship says we're about to pass over a submerged object—a derelict of some sort. The chief says to blast it. Menace to navigation and so forth."

The exec stepped to the squawk-box, and flicked the switch. "Attention. Attention. Y-gun crew report to stations—on the double. Y-gun—on deck."

As he stood there, waiting for the CPO commanding that detail to acknowledge and request orders, he let out a yawn, a prodigious mid-afternoon yawn that threatened to split his head.

THE two Alarians floated motionless in the water of their lifeboat, each immersed in his own thoughts. Shaking off his lethargy, Ekrado began to make a routine check of the condition of the heat ray cannon. Mechanically, he went over the apparatus, his mind still on their problem. The cannon was, of course, in perfect condition.

"Clackety-clack-clack-clack," chattered the Konald detector.

"Metal!" exclaimed Ekrado in surprise.

"Large masses of it," echoed Ronaro.

"Here in the surface waters. That can

only mean . . ."

"Intelligent life," the two minds chorused.

High at the top of the vision screen appeared the bottom of a long narrow metal hull. It was unmistakably a metal ship, the work of intelligent minds, an indication of culture and civilization.

"Only one of us will try to communicate this time," directed Ekrado. "You do it, Ronaro."

This contact was entirely different. Ronaro's questing mind at once encountered intelligence. There was purpose there, not the mindless urges of hunger and fear that they had met before, but rational purpose backed by planning. But there was something else Ronaro sensed beneath the surface, something alien.

"Ekrado!" he exclaimed, shocked. "These creatures are air breathers!"

"Air breathers!" snorted the Captain. "Have you drifted into fantasy Ronaro? Establish contact with them."

"I can't," Ronaro replied after a few moments of intense concentration. "Their minds cannot receive our thought impulses."

"We've got to attract their attention. After they have seen us we'll be able to work out some method of communication."

"It will be hard when we live in two different mediums—we in water and they in air."

"No matter; we will manage somehow after we have made contact with them. I'll start the engine and head for the surface."

Ronaro saw it first, a short cylinder-like object tumbling through the waters, directly toward their craft. Sensing danger instinctively, he cried out:

"Ekrado! Full speed ahead!"

He had barely gotten the thought out when it happened. A great explosion rocked the waters as the depth bomb went off. The lifeboat was smashed open, its alien water blending imperceptibly with the waters of the Atlantic.

The body of a squid appeared on the surface, its tentacles trailing aimlessly. The keen eyes of the men on the destroyer flickered past it, looking for the tell-tale oil slick of a broken submarine, in vain.

"Now just what the hell was that?" wondered the captain, scratching at his balding head.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of **PLANET STORIES**, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1949.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and

county aforesaid, personally appeared Paul L. Payne, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the **PLANET STORIES** and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Company, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Paul L. Payne, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Business manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily, weekly, semi-weekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) PAUL L. PAYNE,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of September, 1949.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1950.)



The battle raged on across the stars!

Flame-Jewel of the Ancients

By **EDWIN L. GRABER**

THE TWO TERRAN SUPER Galactics glided side by side in the immensity of the interstellar void. Secure in the knowledge that they were the mightiest battleships ever built in the known galaxy, they didn't bother to raise their anti-energy shields. They knew, absolutely, that no other warcraft in the universe could equal their strength. . . .

Jukes, the third pilot, lounged carelessly in his gimbal-slung shock seat, idly watching the screen before him. Aside from his sister ship, there was nothing to be seen but the harsh points of starlight. Cautiously he looked over his shoulder to see if the executive officer were nearby, then, apparently satisfied, lit a cigarette and blew an expansive plume of smoke at the serried



The tiny golden sphere, blazing with terrible energy, spelled Galactic Empire at last to the out-space horde, once they had tapped its limitless power. They were grimly amused therefore when Captain Glayne of the Stellar Guardians dropped innocently out of sub-space to view their mighty prize.

banks of instruments that were terraced about him.

Suddenly the intermittent glowing of a red blinker aroused him. Throwing the butt to the deck, he bent forward, squinting into the screen. Far down in one corner he detected an irregularly sparkling mote moving slowly across the blazing points of the distant stars. With a single motion of his arm he swept the Call to Quarters alarm studs and began to speak rapidly into his throat transmitter. As the

muffled vibrating thunder of his ship's drivers rose, he could make out his sister ship gradually swinging into an approach orbit.

A double tap on his shoulder informed him that the first pilot was there to take over. Smoothly he slipped from the shock seat and took up his station with the other two pilots near the auxiliary control boards. Everywhere about him was excited, orderly confusion as the huge warship stripped for possible action. The orbit calculators at his left took up the excited jabbering chorus

and somewhere above the third pilot was aware of the massive charge accumulators for the Kellander miatron blasters whining up the scale.

"It's a Delban," he muttered to his fellow pilots. "Just a pipsqueak, too, blast his miserable, trespassing soul. A light cruiser, from what I saw of him."

The younger one looked at him eagerly. "Do you think he'll fight?"

The third pilot snorted. "One Stellar class cruiser against two Terran Galactics? He'd be out of his mind."

Just then the battle screen lit up and a babbling group of gunnery officers crowded about, feeding firing data to waiting miatron crews. Over their shoulders the third pilot could make out the Delban cruiser as it lay there, slim and deadly against the vast, star-studded vault of space.

"What I'd like to know is why the devil he doesn't run for it," the older pilot said to no one in particular. "Something's up, I'm sure. Delbans just don't act like this."

The third pilot grunted absently, his eyes fixed on the battle screen. The two Galactics now lay on either side of the Delban. His sister ship began to communicate with the new arrival, her yellow beam glowing with baleful intensity. But the pilot wasn't watching. He had noticed something odd about that cruiser. It seemed to bulge in the wrong places. It was completely enclosed by a peculiar mesh antenna which glinted ominously in the faint light.

Then the Delban fired.

For a moment there was stunned amazement in the huge plotting room. It was the very absurdity of the situation rather than mere surprise. To make the blasphemy worse, the Delban had licked out with the beam of a secondary Kellander projector rather than with her main miatron batteries. The damage was slight, the communicator bulb of the other Galactic having been reduced to twisted slag. But this was the grossest of all insults in space warfare and demanded immediate retaliation. The third pilot held his breath in anticipation.

Then it came. The plotting room exploded into frantic activity. Generators screamed into ear-splitting crescendoes as the main driver engines were coupled into

them to raise the anti-energy shield. The Kellander miatron blasters hurled ravening bolts of energy at the audacious Delban, reducing accumulator loads to zero in instants. The remainder of the driver atomics were coupled into the Kellander accumulators sending up loads that were fed through the continuously thundering miatrons at the Delban criser. Literally *trillions* of megawatts lapped at the Delban shield, making it glow up the spectral scale in a brilliant spider web of absorbing power foci. But it held.

THE Delban shield held! The third pilot was unbelievably shocked as he stared at the battle screen. It was simply not conceivable that the two mightiest warships in space could not penetrate the shield of a pipsqueak Stellar cruiser.

Where were they getting the power? The question blazed up in the third pilot's consciousness as he stared at the slim, deadly Delban. Abruptly he recalled where he had seen the Delban's peculiar external mesh antenna.

"Broadcast power!" he blurted to his comrades. "Those devils are receiving broadcast power!"

The other two pilots looked at him incredulously. "Hell!" snorted the older one. "You can't transmit the stuff across interstellar distances."

The third pilot didn't reply. As he watched the screen he suddenly knew they were in trouble. By rights this should have been the greatest shock of all but his mind was so dulled with amazement that he could only shake his head.

The Delban's firing had gradually increased in strength until now both the Terran battleship's mighty shields were themselves glowing up the spectral scale in its spidery force web. Despite the older pilot's doubts, he realized that only broadcast power in unlimited quantities could account for those overloaded shields. But where were they getting it to broadcast? Only an infinite source of supply could do the job.

Paralyzed, he watched the battle screen. He was aware of the miatron blasters falling silent, one after another, as the straining driver atomics were diverted to hold

the shield. Their sister Galactic's blasters had all fallen silent as all the power of her own huge drivers was shunted into the shield generators. Their own shield was trembling and shuddering under the inconceivable impact of the energies that surged at it from the Delban.

Suddenly the pilot saw their sister ship's shield coruscate in a multi-hued spider web of shorting power foci. Then it buckled. The third pilot instinctively averted his face from the indescribably brilliant, eye-searing nova that followed.

His own ship screamed. The drivers, the generators, the converters and accumulators—all of them screamed in ultra-sonic crescendoes in an effort to maintain the crumbling shield. The force webs shorted one after another in brilliant red fire. The third pilot saw it rupture but he never felt it. . . .

For days the twin novae burned in the endless night, then slowly faded to blackened cinders.

II

THE TRI-DI FILM CAME TO AN end and the Council Chamber's soft fluorescents picked up in strength. For a moment the members of Lorle Sector's High Council were stunned and bewildered at what they had seen.

Captain Glayne waited patiently for the explosion which he knew would come. For about the tenth time that morning he fervently cursed all civilians. Not even the valiant efforts of Chairman Dell Thorder could keep them in check. A vast wave of irritation filled him as he listened to the piercing squeak of a fat Councilor named Trask.

"It will mean war, I say—and we haven't had a war involving Terra for seventy years. Lorle Sector must remain neutral—especially if Delb Sector has weapons which can crush super Galactic battleships. Now I say," he squeaked, oblivious of the fact that no one was paying any attention, "that we must request Captain Glayne to leave immediately because his presence might be deemed an overt act by our friends, the Delbans. True, the Stellar Guardians—"

He was suddenly cut off by the staccato thunder of Dell Thorder's gavel. The chairman's thin, ascetic face wore a worried expression as his eyes swept the now silent Council. Of them all, he was the only man Glayne admired. For thirty years he had maneuvered the nine-planet Lorle Sector through the treacherous shoals of Combine politics and never once had the cry of "boss" or "dictator" seriously been raised against him.

"I must confess," he began quietly, "that I do not myself understand fully the implications of this situation. I do know that the fact that Imperial Terra has lost two large battleships is inconsequential. The real point is that the Terran Combine is facing imminent destruction at the hands of Gort Bro-Doral and his Delban Empire. Because we are Delb Sector's nearest neighbor, we may expect the first blow to fall on us. Since it is a known fact that the Intelligence Service of the Stellar Guardians is the finest in the galaxy, I have sent for Captain Glayne to explain certain of the technical aspects of the new Delban weapon in order that we may determine what action to take."

Thorder silently gestured to Glayne who arose and faced the hostile stares of the councilors. Their unexpressed antipathy was amusing rather than irritating. The meager little navy that Lorle Sector did possess drained away funds that could otherwise be used in their pork barrel. However, they all had something to worry about which Thorder hadn't mentioned. The Revolution which had smashed the Delb-Lorle Axis thirty years before had made Gort Bro-Doral a ruthless enemy who would not rest until his ships had utterly destroyed the Lorle cities in retaliation. So far they had depended upon Imperial Terra to support them against the Bro's passionate desire for power. But now the Terran navy was helpless and Lorle was in a desperate plight.

"What Dell Thorder told you is true," he began in a firm, clear voice. "Unfortunately it is an understatement because it implies that there is a possibility of discovering a counter-weapon to offset that of the Delbans. Such is not the case.

"For a long time we have been prone

to think in terms of optimum sizes for warships. We were accustomed to believe that we had reached the pinnacle of development in destructive weapons. The fatal radiations of atomic generators and converters make it necessary to divert a part of the power into shields. These shields are limited in size by the ship size, and the ship size in turn is limited by the size of its power plant. But there is a point of diminishing returns—that is, we cannot build ships larger than the Galactic class battleships without losing efficiency. So for a long time we have believed that there was a limit to the amount of power available in any given class of warship.

"Unfortunately this no longer applies for the Delbans. As you have just seen on the tri-di film obtained by Stellar Guardian Intelligence, a single Stellar cruiser engaged and destroyed two Terran Galactics. This means, as Chairman Thorder has suggested, that the entire fleet strength of the nine hundred Sectors of the Terran Combine is now quite helpless against the Delban Grand Fleet."

Glayne paused for a moment. In spite of the room's air conditioning, many of the Councilors were mopping their faces anxiously. The one called Trask was chewing his lower lip nervously, not liking a bit what the tall Guardian officer had to say. Glayne felt a twinge of sympathy for his three hundred and fifty million constituents.

"The crux of the whole problem is the source of this new Delban power. Experts in our organization are absolutely certain that they are using broadcast power, but this information is based on the tri-di film you have seen which our agents have stolen from the Terran Admiralty Office at Luna-port. It may be a fake, but that is hardly likely. The implications of broadcast power are so tremendous as to defy reason. Even under the best laboratory conditions the power lost in transmission makes it impractical. Consequently any source which produces energies capable of smashing two Terran Galactic battleships at perhaps stellar distances is vast beyond conjecture. As incredible as this sounds, we believe that the Delbans have it. As to its precise nature, we are still in the dark. How-

ever, the Stellar Guardians, at least, are in a position to investigate."

Dell Thorder cleared his throat at this point and Glayne stopped.

"You see our position," said the weary Chairman. "Almost any countermeasure we attempt can be interpreted as an overt act by Bro-Doral. Hence any action on our part will make our ruin sooner instead of later. However, there is one thin possibility and that is Captain Glayne. It is true that he is a mercenary belonging to the Stellar Guardians. But Kairn's Intelligence vouches for him absolutely and I am informed that he is as competent as any man in the Lorle Fleet.

"Because of the peculiar nature of the Stellar Guardian organization, he can carry out investigations where any such move on our part would be suicidal. In my opinion, our only possible chance is to employ him in this capacity to locate the Delban power transmitter—if one exists. It is possible that an all-out attack with all the units we can muster will succeed in destroying it."

As Thorder finished, Glayne took a deep breath. He stood motionless by the immense circular table. He knew that the Councilors, like all small planet men, were impressed with his great shoulders and their suggestion of tremendous physical strength. But if they knew what torment he had to endure under high driver thrust as a result of his great size, they wouldn't be so impressed.

Dell Thorder coughed. "Captain Glayne, would you mind stepping into the outer room while we take a vote? We will inform you directly."

GLAYNE nodded silently and left the Chamber. Disregarding the ante-room's soft chairs, he stood against the wall, waiting. His space-tanned face hardened as he looked thoughtfully from the glassene window at the jewel-like city of Lorle Capital, a dazzling white under the noon sun. Mentally he pictured the sleek Delban cruisers flashing overhead in fast orbits, pouring phenomenal torrents of energy into the pathetic shield the city would attempt to set up. The Lorle High Council would trust him. In the end, even

Trask would. They were all rabbits looking around desperately for someone to defend them. They would hire him; they would pat him on the back and shake his hand; they would make him solemnly swear the Guardian Oath to struggle against all their enemies. And Glayne would promise to do all of these things.

But he would lie.

He would do none of these things. Instead he would do all in his power to bring war to Lorle. He would commit an overt act against the Delbans and they would cry for Lorle blood. Their fast, sleek ships would deal out death and destruction to the very cities which he would swear ever so solemnly to defend to his last breath. With a coldly objective part of his mind he marveled at the consummate treachery he would perform.

But another part of his mind was aghast. He was unable to suppress the bitter waves of remorse that filled him. Again he remembered the serious, heavy-jowled face of Garstow, Grand Admiral of the Stellar Guardians. In the Dorleb Headquarters, only forty hours before, Garstow had said: "Glayne, we need time. Some Sector must be thrown to the wolves. While the Delbans are occupied with that unfortunate Sector, we will have time to unravel their broadcast scramblers, build antennae of our own, and perhaps even locate their power transmitter. The Policy Organ has decided upon Lorle Sector. And it has decided that you, Glayne, are the man for the job."

Glayne had listened in stunned silence to Garstow. A protest rose automatically to his lips but he had crushed it back with a click of his booted heels. And now here he was in Lorle Capital with his Stellar class cruiser *Algol* ready for action. When the fat men with rabbit eyes emerged from the Council Chamber and empowered him to work for them, he would be ready to move. A sudden raid on Delban space commerce, an energy bomb hurtling into a Delban city from a stolen Lorle warship—any one of a dozen expedients would have the ruthless Gort Bro-Doral screaming down on the helpless cities of Lorle.

As he stared at the afternoon brilliance

of Lorle Capital he realized that his treachery was an ironic manifestation of a greater loyalty. People forgot that the Stellar Guardians were dedicated to the ideal of human progress. The great mercenary organization recognized the inevitability of war and determined that wars should be fought according to rules. But the Delbans were now in a position to flout all rules and destroy all human progress. Hence all rules were forgotten and ruthless treachery was the order of the day as every resource was exploited to crush Gort Bro-Doral and his Delban Empire.

Then the door of the Council Chamber opened and Dell Thorde stepped into the anteroom. He faced Glayne silently for a moment, lines of weariness etched in his tired, old face.

Then he thrust out his hand and said simply: "We wish you the best of luck, Glayne."

The Guardian Captain took the outstretched hand and almost winced at the trust he saw in Thorde's eyes. The weight of the crushing responsibility bowed down the Chairman's frail shoulders, but he seemed to burn with an indomitable determination to defend his people. He was not a rabbit but a warrior. And Glayne was going to betray him.

"I'll do my best," he said in quick, husky tones.

He felt like a swine as he closed the door behind him.

III

IT WAS A SECOND-CLASS NIGHT spot called The Yarga. Glayne would meet the Stellar Guardian espionage chief for the Lorle Sector here. As he stood at the entrance bar absorbing the customary drink prior to entering the first stage, he swept the place with cold grey eyes. Evidently the city commission of Lorle Capital was going through a phase of puritanism because the deadly Kesla lights were absent and the swirling strains of the reportedly *jawth*-fed orchestra were considerably toned down. Nevertheless, the general impression was quite sufficiently exotic to suit Glayne as he entered the dimly-lit first stage.

Vaguely he was aware of the less restrained laughter of patrons who had already reached the second stage, having passed through the vibrator screen that simulated a soothing color movement. The function of the vibrator was to give jaded sensibilities the physical fillip necessary to convince reluctant laggards that they really were ready for the second stage. Glayne was also aware of his table's slight movement toward the vibrator screen and he felt a wave of irritation at the prospect of chasing through nine stages in this outlandish place looking for his contact.

Suddenly the annunciator light in the center of his table began to glow an intermittent red-orange. Glayne looked at it, eyes narrowed. Experimentally he stabbed its speaker stud and a voice seemed to emerge from the empty air before his face.

"Captain, you look *so* lonely and disconsolate sitting by yourself. Won't you join me?" It was a woman's voice, low and casual. Glayne was briefly startled—he had expected that his contact would be a man. Then it occurred to him that she was not his contact, but that doubt vanished when he remembered that he had discarded his uniform for the light grey business jumper of a young business executive. How could she know him for a Captain in the Stellar Guardians unless she was his contact?

On the other hand, she had not made herself known with the code which had been selected beforehand. Puzzled and suspicious, he flicked the transmitter stud and said cautiously: "Where are you?"

"You can't miss me, darling," she replied. "Just stand up."

Glayne hesitated, hefting the heavy, comforting weight of the Cardy blaster under his arm pit. With a shrug he tossed off the remnants of the blue-green *borse* which stirred lambently in the exquisite goblet. Then he stood up.

She was perfectly correct. He couldn't miss her from ten light years, much less thirty feet. She was tall and graceful in a tailored green jumper which half suggested, half concealed the long, smooth curves of her young body. She had coppery red hair and wide-set green eyes that smiled boldly at him. She rested a hand on her hip in mock impatience.

"Well, don't just stand there, fat-head!" she cried across the tables. "What do you usually do when you haven't seen someone for years and years?"

With an effort Glayne collected himself, assayed a weak smile, and maneuvered around the tables to her side.

"Oh, you look perfectly gorgeous," she said, oblivious to the amused people around her. "Dance with me—you always were a divine dancer. You know, I was telling Jani just today how I wished you'd come for a visit—we haven't seen you for such a long time. . . ."

She prattled gaily on. Somewhat dazed, Glayne led her to the resilient dance floor, an absurdity which had suddenly become the very latest rage overnight. The girl slipped smoothly into his arms, her fragrant, perfumed hair under his chin.

He wasn't at all prepared for the hard tones of her voice when she said: "I regret to inform you, Captain Glayne, that the agent you were supposed to meet here is dead. He had an unfortunate accident with a Cardy gun."

Glayne stiffened perceptibly. "Who did it?"

"Probably Delban espionage. They know that something is in the fire and they're not wearing kid gloves to find out what it is."

"Did they discover the identity of the person he was supposed to meet?"

"No," she replied. "But they're looking. Fortunately the organization was not in the dark as to whom he would meet. Otherwise I could never have found you."

Glayne's eyes narrowed. Too many people knew what was going on. That made it very dangerous. But what made it even more dangerous was the fact that he himself did *not* know what was going on. Agents of three organizations were involved in the search for information and the tangled maze of plots would be deadly for anyone caught in the middle. He was silent for a moment, battle-trained senses sifting his surroundings instinctively. Something . . . somewhere . . . was odd.

"If you will notice their eyes," the girl remarked dryly, "you will find that a good proportion of the Yarga's clientele are high on Soames drug."

GLAYNE started and looked more closely at the couples entering the stage. Then he saw what she meant. Here and there he saw eyes—burning eyes—eyes that glittered with a brilliant fire that emanated from huge, dilated pupils. They were using the marvelous Soames energizing drug; it fairly blazed from their slitted lids. Its purpose was to accelerate physical reaction speeds—but why use it on a small planet like Lorle IV? With the question came the answer. Their quarry had the .95 reaction index of a big planet man. That was Glayne's index. And that meant that they were right on top of him.

"I think," he intoned softly to the girl, "it would be wise for us to move on to the next stage."

In reply she slipped smoothly from his arms, seized him by the sleeve of his loose-fitting jumper, and propelled him to the tingle screen. When he balked she grinned at him and stood in the field of the screen herself and laughed at him. It was a bubbly, elated laugh. Glayne liked it. And he liked the way the soothing color movements of the tingle screen caressed the long curves of her figure. But he didn't like the nervous manner in which the glittering, dilated pupils flickered at them and held them curiously, then flickered casually away.

The girl was clever, he realized. The keyed-up Delban agents would be far less likely to suspect an intoxicated couple of dark designs. Suddenly the red-headed girl stumbled, accidentally pushed from the other side of the screen. Instinctively Glayne reached out to steady her—reached out with a long, liquid motion of his powerful arm. In one instant every Soames-dilated eye in the room was upon him. In another, Cardy guns were magically appearing in a dozen hands.

But, fast as they were, Glayne was faster. He drew his own weapon with blurred speed, fired, and flung himself and the girl through the screen into the second stage. The Delban agents hesitated to fire blindly through the screen and rushed after them. The big Guardian hurtled through the exotic darkness of the second stage with girl in his left arm. He scattered and smashed tables right and left, littering the floor with bewildered and drunken patrons.

The exit toward which he was heading was suddenly no longer an exit. It was filled with a crowd of huge, glittering eyes and wicked looking Cardy guns. In a single movement, Glayne dropped to the floor and fired.

The second stage was in an uproar. Now agents were pouring through the tingle screen in pursuit. Desperately Glayne sought for a means of escape. Then he saw the portal that evidently led to the kitchen or the bar. He grabbed the dazed red-head and rushed through the portal, swept down a short corridor, turned, and straight-armed two tray-bearing waiters as he dashed through a second portal. And suddenly he was behind the entrance bar where he had taken his first drink. He tensed for a fraction of a second, then vaulted the low bar.

A bartender and two customers stared at them with blank amazement but there was not a Delban agent in sight. Swiftly Glayne set the girl upon her feet and together they fled from the building. He noted approvingly the capable-looking Cardy she held in her small fist.

"My flier is outside," she said. "They've probably surrounded the place, but in the confusion the ones outside won't know us. We'll try to bluff through."

She nodded and put her gun away. As they approached the flier parking area she clutched his arm with intoxicated possessiveness. Glayne was right; here and there a Delban agent glanced at them suspiciously — then looked contemptuously away. The object of their search was alone. Controlling his heavy breathing with difficulty, Glayne approached an attendant, digging out his micro-wave key jewel.

"Here! Get my air-jet," he panted.

But instead of the expected response, the man stiffened for a measureless instant, then whirled with blurred speed. A Cardy blaster magically materialized in his hand and his eyes burned with Soames-induced ferocity. But Glayne was a shade faster. His left streaked with dazzling speed into the agent's stomach and the Delban folded up, his motor nerves paralyzed from the blow in the solar plexus.

Crouching, they ran toward Glayne's air-jet. A Cardy bolt splashed into the side

of a flier just above Glayne's head, battering the tough beralloy and sending a shower of white hot droplets in all directions. As they reached his air-jet, Glayne whirled and fired rapidly and with murderous accuracy at the pursuing Delban agents. As they scuttled for cover, Glayne turned and waved the talisman through the micro-wave field and the door swung open.

Instantly he shoved the girl into the cabin, then climbed in behind her. He let the tiny atomic engine thunder beyond audibility, then fed power to the jets in huge gulps. With a tremendous surge the little craft leaped into the air and roared over the roof of the Yarga. A couple of Delban energy bolts slapped viciously into the air-jet, but soon Glayne out-distanced them, flying low over the dark countryside.

The girl sighed beside him. "This has been a very warm evening. Do you think they'll catch us?"

"I don't think they're organized that well," Glayne grunted, busy with the course-computer. "Their whole assault was hasty and ill-timed. I doubt if they even had time to set up an air net."

"But, now that they are out in the open, they will move quickly. Do you have a specific plan in mind, Captain Glayne?"

The Guardian frowned and cast a quick glance at her. He was puzzled by her insistence. "My Flagship, the *Algol*, is maneuvered into a fast orbit behind inert detector screens. About ninety miles out. I've just set course to intercept her before we hit dayside."

In reply the girl bent past his shoulder toward the luminous figures which floated in the dial of the computer, announcing the course. The delicate lines of her face were hard in the faint light. Again Glayne felt a twinge of uneasiness and it was not dispelled by the soft touch of her body against his.

"What is your name?" he asked belatedly, trying to make out the features of her face in the dim light from the instrument panel.

She chuckled in the darkness and he fancied he heard a note of triumph. "Lieutenant Niala Chodred," she said. "Espionage Bureau of Imperial Terra. At your service, Captain."

OF Imperial Terra! The words fairly blazed in Glayne's consciousness. His hand shot like lightning for the Cardy in his arm-pit holster, then stopped in mid-motion as he became aware of a hard, cylindrical object thrust into his ribs. It was her tiny Cardy blaster.

Through the waves of chagrin and impotent fury that surged up within him, Glayne heard her say mockingly: "Guardian warriors are supposed to function like machines when on missions, aren't they, Captain? Since when are machines rattled by pretty girls?"

The lines on Glayne's face deepened but he said nothing. Her taunting rebuke was well-deserved. He had certainly lacked the emotionless precision which was the Guardian ideal. But the mere fact that he had been caught napping was inconsequential beside the implications of her presence as a Terran agent. How much did Terra know? The question hammered urgently in Glayne's mind.

Even as it flashed through his head, he heard her amused voice say: "In time of crisis, Captain Glayne, the Stellar Guardians invariably throw allies and friends to the dogs in order to gain time. This is common knowledge. So all we had to do was determine the direction of the Guardian move. We immediately thought of Lorie. And we even thought that you might be the man the Guardians would send, Glayne, because we have a complete file on your activities for the past ten years. We know that you have been on good terms with Delban brass since that successful exploring job you performed at Jorger Sun, five years ago."

With growing horror, Glayne listened to her unfold the deepest Guardian secrets—derived by Terran Espionage through simple induction. What a fool he had been for trusting her even for a minute! Unless he could stop her, she could utterly destroy all Guardian hopes to overcome the Delbans. His great body tensed as he stared at her from the corner of his eye, watching for the slightest sign of inattention.

"Glayne," she continued, in a hard, objective voice with no trace of amusement, "Imperial Terra is not itself adverse to a

policy of throwing someone to the dogs in order to gain time. But we want to give the dogs someone who can put up a fight. Poor Lorle would not be much of a match for Gort Bro-Doral and she wouldn't gain us much time. But the Stellar Guardians would. In fact, the Stellar Guardians themselves will commit the overt act—with a little help."

The Guardian Captain was stunned at the very audacity of her plan. He had to admit that its logic was undeniable. But how could she possibly seek to accomplish such an incredible feat as forcing the Guardians into a suicidal attack upon the Delbans? Unless. . . .

Then his worst suspicions were realized as she said: "The Ganser mind-conditioning treatments will not harm your essential-ego, Captain Glayne. But, if you struggle against them, your mind will be shattered and you will be left an idiot when the effects wear off."

A cold thrill of fear caressed Glayne's spine as he heard her words. The brutal, tearing fingers of the horrible mind-conditioner devised by the Delban Espionage Chief, Hoteh Ganser, would change his goals and values in the space of only a few hours. What seemed to him irrational now would be the height of reason after his conditioning. As the ramifications of Imperial Terra's plot came clear to him, Glayne realized with increasing urgency that he simply had to overcome the girl.

"You may be sure that your attack on Sterle II will not be in vain," came the girl's brittle tones. "Admiral Bardled will station units of the Imperial Terran Fleet in hyper-space with the purpose of cracking the wave length of the broadcast power and locating its source."

"Our plan is much cleaner and nobler than yours, is it not, Captain Glayne? You Stellar Guardians are all hard, ruthless fighters. You can take care of yourselves. But poor little Lorle wouldn't have a chance. Don't you agree, Captain? Don't you find it heroic to sacrifice yourself to the Delban dog pack to gain time for the rest of the galaxy?"

Glayne ignored the mockery in her voice. A sudden wave of bitter anger swept over him at the presumptuous manner in which

they were all bent upon throwing one another to the dogs. Surely they were not so tactically poverty-stricken that they could not conceive of a better plot which would not demand such a tremendous sacrifice of human life.

SUDDENLY, almost without warning, the tiny spark of rebellion within him blazed up in hot determination. To hell with Garstow and the Stellar Guardian Policy Organ. To hell with Admiral Bardled and the Terran fleet. To hell with everyone. The vague suggestion of a plan was forming in the recesses of his mind, breath-taking in its audacity and possibly, just possibly workable.

But what of the girl? To think about overpowering her was one thing; actually doing it was another. She had already killed one Guardian earlier this evening, he presumed. She would not hesitate to kill another. That meant that he would have to meet cunning with cunning.

"You don't mind if I smoke one last cigar while I am still in control of my essential-ego, do you?" he asked, trying to match her mocking, satirical mood. "I don't believe the Ganser-personality enjoys tobacco as much as the average Guardian Captain."

She alerted instantly, but the Cardy didn't waver the least fraction of an inch. "You are not the average Guardian Captain," she said in a strange, low voice. "But go ahead and smoke."

Fleeting Glayne wondered what she had meant, then he let the thought flicker away as he concentrated on his cigar. He reached for the radio-active on the instrument panel, flicking it so that its coal gleamed into gradual dull red life. She was watching him like a hawk, he knew, and smiled inwardly. The closer the better. Idly he began to hum a snatch of melody, a curious thing arranged in minors. It was peculiarly suited to his unsteady bass. He waved the radio-active in his hand in slow, sweeping circles in time to his humming.

Smoothly he ignited his cigar, puffing the semi-narcotic smoke in thick clouds. He hummed louder, his voice pushing the deep, wailing dirge into the cabin. It acted like a drug, throwing everything into slow

time. It numbed the sensibilities and dulled acute perceptions.

Ever so gently and smoothly Glayne turned his head and glanced at the girl. His scheme had worked. Her eyes automatically followed the circles he described with the radio-active in his hand. She was lulled into a near-hypnotic condition.

In a single jump, Glayne seized the hand in which she held the Cardy gun. She reacted instantly, but not quite fast enough to wrest the weapon from his hand. Like a spring under great pressure she exploded into writhing, clawing, kicking, biting action. Her savage ferocity so startled Glayne that he nearly lost the weapon to her. As he sought to fend her off with one hand and throw the weapon away with the other, he felt her nails sink agonizingly into the side of his face. Gasping, he finally got rid of the weapon, then drew back his fist and slugged her with a short, jabbing punch.

Panting, he recovered from the struggle. Suddenly he became aware of the peculiar angle of flight of the air-jet. It was shrieking down on its stubby fins toward the planet's surface. Somehow the Terran girl had kicked off the robot control. As he righted the craft and reoriented the course, he became aware of the girl's brooding eyes on him.

"You are very clever, Captain Glayne," she said. "Perhaps one might even say courageous. A heavy planet man like yourself should not risk himself with such reckless bravery in a physical struggle with a small planet individual."

Glayne was stung by her rebuke, but he was even more startled at her bitterness. She was an espionage agent and she knew the risks and hazards involved. Certainly she was not whining at her defeat.

"How do you propose to fake the overt act, Captain?" she continued in a light, conversational tone.

Glayne was grimly aware of the accusation in her words but he said nothing. She had a right to be bitter, he realized. Ironically, she was going to get her way after all, though she didn't know it yet. He grinned mirthlessly at her, the cigar clenched between his teeth.

She was beautiful, but especially so in

the resentment that was mirrored in her features. Glayne was suddenly very sorry that she had killed the Guardian agent he was supposed to meet. Otherwise he would have liked very much to have known her.

IV

THE NINE - HUNDRED - FOOT bulk of the Stellar class cruiser *Algol* loomed hugely over the little air-jet as Glayne maneuvered it into the gaping reception maw in the cruiser's belly. The craft's slight lurch as it came to rest just inside the lock awoke the Terran girl who had fallen asleep.

Glayne sighed, glancing at her. She stared back at him coolly. He shook his head and said, "That green outfit of yours will just have to go, Lieutenant Chodred. Crew's morale, you know."

Her eyes widened in sudden dismay. "But . . . but surely you don't want me to—"

He grinned. "You will have to wear a crew jumper." Glancing again at her graceful figure, he made a mental note: it would have to be an over-size jumper—several sizes over.

Stiffly they climbed from the little air-jet and propelled themselves weightlessly to the elevator. Seconds later its door slid open and they were on the navigation bridge. Glayne took the girl's arm and escorted her around the bulking computers and auxiliary boards to the Captain's Station.

Graysen, the grizzled old Executive Officer, snapped to attention and delivered a brisk salute. Glayne acknowledged it absently, his attention absorbed primarily in a hasty inspection of the bridge. Then he became aware of the intent stares of Graysen and the other officers. Those who were not gawking at Niala Chodred were staring hard at his cheek, obviously striving not to laugh.

Puzzled, Glayne felt his cheek; then glanced at his hand. There was blood on it. He suddenly recalled the two long red welts inflicted by the Terran agent's fingernails and realized that his officers were drawing the obvious inferences. Abruptly he was stung with chagrin and pictured the

juicy tidbit of gossip which he had just supplied gunroom scuttlebutt throughout the Guardian Fleet. Exasperated at his own lack of foresight, he stared back at his officers, browbeating them into submission with his stony gaze.

"Morning, Captain," drawled Graysen, breaking the embarrassed silence.

"Good morning, Commander," returned Glayne. "Stoke her up. Set an orbit for Sterle II. Incidentally, this is Lieutenant Niala Chodred of Imperial Terran Espionage. I met her instead of our own agent. He had an unfortunate accident with a Cardy gun—I'm told."

Glayne glanced significantly at the girl. Graysen nodded understandingly and raised a quizzical eyebrow in Niala's direction. She looked from one to the other, mystified.

Then sudden understanding registered on her features. "Glayne!" she cried in a horrified tone, "I didn't kill him! Terran Espionage had nothing to do with his death. He was murdered by the Delbans and we found out by bribing one of Kairn's men that he was supposed to make contact with an unknown Guardian big gun at the Yarga. We knew he was to meet you but the Delbans didn't. That's the only reason you escaped them, Captain Glayne. The Delbans murdered your contact agent but I had nothing to do with it. You must believe me!"

Glayne smiled slyly at her and said, "Of course, Lieutenant Chodred, we believe you." He brusquely turned his back on her and said to Graysen, "You will have to move in with one of the other officers, Commander. Just temporarily, of course."

"Aye, sir," replied Graysen.

PRESENTLY the navigation bridge was filled with hurrying men. The orbit computers began to clatter noisily and somewhere within the depths of the ship a keening whine indicated that the huge driver atomics were being warmed.

"What acceleration, Captain?" Graysen asked, appearing with a sheaf of orbit calculations.

Glayne was on the point of saying three G's out of deference to Niala Chodred and her light planet birth. But he thrust her from his mind as he realized that speed

was of the utmost importance. High acceleration meant speed and speed meant time saved. Time to carry out his bold scheme, time to locate and sabotage the mysterious Delban power broadcast, time to build the mesh antennae and energize the Stellar Guardian fleet . . .

His face hardened grimly. "Five G's," he said shortly.

Doubt flickered for an instant across Graysen's face as he glanced at the girl. Then he shrugged and turned away to comply with the order.

Silently Glayne took Niala Chodred's arm and descended to the next deck. As the first traces of a floor appeared under their feet, he opened the door to Graysen's quarters. It was furnished with the Spartan simplicity of a typical warrior. Trophies and a few rather gruesome battle prints decorated the bulkheads. Niala examined the room curiously but preserved a hurt silence.

He showed her the acceleration hammocks and how to use the anti-thrust drugs in their small surettes.

"If you need me," he said, "I will be in the cabin at the end of the corridor."

She looked at him with mock surprise. "What? No connecting door? Really, Captain, you've shattered all my girlish illusions about the Stellar Guardians."

Glayne paused, his hand on the door stud. He turned around and said, "I want to wake up tomorrow without suffering an accident with a Cardy gun." He closed the door behind him.

By the time he reached the navigation bridge again, the *Algol* had built up to five G's. To Glayne, accustomed to the heavy Dorleb planets, this was a little more than twice normal.

Young Brodis, the ship's Intelligence Officer, approached him and saluted. "I beg your pardon, sir. Communications just handed these over to me—I thought you might be interested." He extended a sheaf of flimsies to Glayne.

The big Guardian examined them, eyes narrowed. They were transcripts of an official Lorde news bulletin. Rapidly he read:

Intelligence Chief Kairn announced tonight the death of Carling Clawdor, al-

legedly an espionage agent of the Stellar Guardians. It is believed that he was to contact another agent or agents at the Yarga night club this evening. Prior to his death by Cardy burns, Clawdor accused Delban agents.

Intelligence Chief Kairn also revealed that a raid carried out on the Yarga night club failed to apprehend the Guardian agents. Just before their arrival a spectacular gun battle took place. Investigation is still proceeding, Kairn announced, indicating that . . .

Silently Glayne handed the flimsies back to Brodis, chewing his lower lip. It was incredible that Kairn should reveal such confidential information. Obviously the Lorle Intelligence Chief was taking no chances on provoking an incident which the Delbans could twist into a pretext for war. But an even more important fact came clear to Glayne: Niala Chodred had not murdered Clawdor. He was very glad that she was innocent of the Guardian agent's death. Unconsciously he framed the apology he would make to her as he climbed with an effort into the Captain's Dome and lowered himself into its gimbal-slung shock seat.

Far off to his left the globe of Lorle IV shrank visibly. Again the mental picture of the Delban warships streaking over those short horizons in fast orbits flashed across his mind and he imagined them pouring their inconceivable torrents of energy into the unprotected cities. At least, he thought, he wouldn't be guilty of that crime. But what was the real chance of the wild scheme and its attendant insubordination which he had conceived in the air-jet?

For a long time he pondered it. No matter how much he rationalized, it was still insubordination and it lay heavily on his mind. Suddenly he was shaky and he realized that he held the fate of the civilized galaxy in his hands. If he blundered, would that not be a greater crime than the mere sacrifice of Lorle? Glayne could not resolve the question and he was vaguely glad that decision was no longer in his hands and he could not turn back if he wanted to.

THE *Algol* emerged from sub-space four hundred million kilometers below the plane of the ecliptic in the Sterle System. With her identity signals broadcasting at full power, she changed course, veering "upward" toward the second planet of Sterle's small brood of five.

The faint beams of the distant red dwarf sun shed a sickly glow on the navigation bridge through the huge glassene ports. Shortly after her arrival the *Algol* was picked up by two fast and deadly Delban destroyers of the Planet class. Almost delicate in their unobtrusiveness, they slipped in on either side of the *Algol* and escorted her swiftly to the capital planet of the Delban Empire, Sterle II.

"There's one consolation, anyway," Graysen remarked to his chief as they stood before the glassene ports. "They don't seem to have fitted out their whole fleet with receiving antennae yet."

Glayne nodded, flipping on the small auxiliary battle screen at his side. Expertly he manipulated the viewer until one of the rakish Delban warships ballooned up mightily on its plate. The tell-tale copery mesh antenna was absent.

"That is fortunate," Glayne grunted dourly. "But there is the possibility that these ships may be too small for the installation."

The Delbans began to decelerate and the *Algol's* pilot hastily imitated them. Faintly Glayne made out the tiny red ball that was Sterle II. Uneasily Glayne realized that he had better go over the plan once more with Niala Chodred. Next to himself, the Terran girl's part was the most important. He grunted at Graysen to take over and descended to her quarters. He knocked twice perfunctorily and entered the room.

Niala smiled up at him, pleased at his visit. "How much longer now, Captain?"

Glayne looked down at her, marveling at the failure of her absurdly huge jumper in concealing the long, smooth curves of her body. Her hair was a varied mass of copper and gold which gleamed with a subtle display of half tones. In the cabin's fluorescents Glayne noted for the first time that she had once been the owner of a saddle of freckles across her nose. Now only

one or two were left which contrasted deliciously with the smoothness of her face. Glayne felt a sudden desire to jet down on Sterle Capital like the legendary buccaneers and ransack the best dress shops to outfit her properly.

"Well?" she said.

"Huh?" said Glayne foolishly. Then he collected his wandering thoughts and replied, "Oh, yes. We're being escorted in now. We'll be down in a couple of hours. I wanted to make a last minute check of the plan."

"Ahh," she replied, stretching with devastating effect in the heavy jumper. "We've done this so many times, Captain. But really they're very entertaining."

"I'm glad you like them," said Glayne dryly. "You should because the plan is substantially the one you would have had me carry out under a Ganser-personality."

She colored, then regained control of her vascular motors and recited the plan in a sing-song monotone: "We jet down at Sterle Capital. You and I attend the informal reception. Commander Graysen remains with the *Algol* along with Lieutenant Harbin. But precisely at twenty-one hundred Standard, Harbin and twenty men leave the ship, ostensibly on liberty. At twenty-one fifteen, you and I attempt to maneuver Gort Bro-Doral and General Ganser together in conversation. At that moment Lieutenant Harbin will land on the roof of the palace, attacking the guards there. Then we will hustle the two Delbans into the elevator, take them to the roof, and escape with Harbin in the flier. In the meantime Graysen will have blasted off in the *Algol*; we will intercept him twenty miles over Topo Gulf."

"Exactly," Glayne said. "Everything is going well so far. We've just received permission to land a liberty party so we don't have to worry about that anymore."

He took some hand-drawn maps from the case in his hand. "Brodis and I made these from memory and a little inside information—one of the palace, one of the roof, and one of the grounds. The whole thing depends upon whether they are using an old style one-way shield. If so, we can get out all right. Otherwise we're finished."

She nodded and bent over the maps. Glayne bit the end off of a cigar, then lit it meticulously. He smiled quizzically at the girl. "How's your courage?" he asked.

Her wide green eyes looked up thoughtfully into his. "I've seen some shoe-string deals pulled before, but Captain, I'll have to award you the prize—never one as thin and short as this."

Glayne felt a sudden fear and a sudden hunger as he looked at her. He could not bear the thought of failure—and the consequent fate of Niala Chodred. His cheek twitched nervously and he reached for her, gathering her into his powerful arms and drawing her face to his. Her breath was hot against his cheek and he could feel her heart pounding heavily against his chest. Willingly she responded to his kisses.

"Here's to luck," he breathed.

"And plenty of it," she replied.

V

TRY AS HE MIGHT, GLAYNE could never accustom himself to these Sectors which lay far out on the edge of galaxy. Neighboring stars were hundreds of light years apart while the great belt of stars that was in the Main Galaxy revealed itself only as a faint haze twenty thousand light years distant. He could not shake off the loneliness that settled over him like a shroud, separating him from everything he knew. He was accustomed to the vast star clouds of Sagittarius; it was there he had spent the first ten years of his Guardian-ship.

A dry and thirsty wind seemed to suck the moisture from his body as he waited by the after lock with Niala. It swept across the hard surface of the space-port and sang dolefully around the mass of the grounded *Algol*; it even seemed to characterize the Delbans themselves. A lonely people out on this forsaken edge of the galaxy, they hungered and thirsted after wealth and power. The Guardian sympathized with them to some extent, yet at the same time realized the awful threat to civilization they represented with the mysterious, titanic broadcast power at their disposal.

Again Glayne felt inner qualms as he

considered the odds against them. Grimly he crushed them out and touched with almost superstitious reverence the tiny blaster at his hip—for ornamental purposes only. More confidently he hefted the weight of the heavy Cardy at his arm-pit.

The small surface-jet which had set out for the *Algol* immediately after the mushrooming blasts of its landing jets subsided now drew up at the tiny waiting dock formed by the *Algol's* after lock. The lack of formality, Glayne knew, was as blatant an insult as the Delbans could manage. He smiled mirthlessly to himself. They couldn't please him more if they tried. The less pomp and ceremony attached to him, the more smoothly his plan would work.

A single Delban emerged from the surface-jet, evidently a civilian judging from his dress. He was incredibly tall and thin and made Glayne very uncomfortable because he had to tilt his head back to get a good look at him.

"Captain Glayne," began the emissary in a high, sighing nasal, "on behalf of His Imperial Excellency, Ruler of Ten Thousand Suns, Master of the Cosmos, and Supreme Overlord of the Delban Empire, Gort Bro-Doral, I humbly welcome you to Sterle II." He bowed very low.

Glayne, nervously anticipating almost anything, could hardly restrain his laughter at this comic pomposity. It was quite out of place in the desolate, curiously-deserted space-port. He and Niala entered the rear compartment of the surface car and sunk back in the luxurious cushions. Their Delban guide tooled it with expert ease from the space-port and down a traffic artery toward the bright blob on the horizon that was Sterle Capital.

In minutes, it seemed, they were pausing for the first guard check along the private road that led to the Bro's fabulous palace. Glayne had been there once before, five years ago. They passed two more guard checks. For a minute Glayne thought they were safely on the palace grounds, only to be disillusioned by another, and this time very close, guard check.

The weapons' detector emitted a raucous buzz when they came into its field. Suspiciously the guards stared at them, their weapons leveled. Seeing the tiny dot at

Glayne's hip, they smiled and passed them on with contemptuous nods.

What a hell of a mess, he thought to himself. It was too late to back out. In another hour Harbin would be on his way to the palace—and right into a hive of trigger-happy guards. One faint consolation was their contempt which would render them more vulnerable to the surprise attack he planned. But on the whole it looked pretty grim. He suppressed his unhappy thoughts as the surface-jet drew up at last beneath a gigantic, arched entrance.

Niala squeezed his hand bravely, casting a quick smile at him.

Heartened by her display of courage, he climbed from the little jet car and followed the escorting Delban down a long series of luxuriously furnished corridors. Eventually they turned off into an enormous reception room brilliantly illuminated by chandeliers of priceless Tharna crystals. Tremendous tapestries hung along the wall, depicting ancient, pre-spaceship battle scenes. A score or so of guests stood about the huge room, all of them quite obviously in very advanced stages of drunkenness. Quite cheerfully they spilled drinks on the priceless *jrik* carpets or on the equally priceless marl Shanzi-wood furnishings.

GLAYNE was puzzled by all the intoxication. As he speculated, it suddenly occurred to him that they were celebrating. Quite obviously they believed that they had won a victory of some sort in the diplomatic call by the Stellar Guardian *Algol*. Glayne had to agree that it was a logical conclusion and resolved to exploit their mistaken belief as far as possible.

The first person to be presented to Glayne and Niala was General Hoteh Ganser. He was hopelessly drunk. Glayne knew the pop-eyed Delban Espionage Chief only by reputation; he was rather disappointed at the dried and withered figure he cut. Nevertheless he was pleased to see the Delban in an intoxicated condition; he could be more easily handled.

"The Bro will arrive presently," their guide informed them. Affairs of state prevented his presence at the moment. Meanwhile they were introduced to a num-

ber of curious and intoxicated guests—high-ranking, Glayne gathered, from the monotonous repetition of titles.

Then General Ganser was before them again, accompanied by another Delban in a brilliant uniform surmounted by a gaudy, flowing cape. He was aristocratic and condescending in his demeanor and a smile played about his eyes and dry lips.

"May I present His Excellency, Gort Bro-Doral . . . Captain Glayne of the Stellar Guardians," introduced Ganser. His eyes were owlish with forced dignity. Gort Bro-Doral waved him away with a careless sweep of his arm and bowed politely to Glayne.

"I think we met several years ago, Captain. Am I right? But of course. Won't you and your . . . er . . . lady have a drink?"

Glayne colored angrily. Yes, they would have a drink. He glanced casually at his wrist-chromo. Twenty minutes . . . just twenty minutes before Harbin would be down on the roof.

He sipped slowly at the huge cup of *borse* which the Bro had personally ladled out for him, letting its blue-green smoothness ease his parched throat and his nervousness. Niala, at his sign, slipped away and was immediately surrounded by a crowd of the outlanders, General Ganser at the head. They knew a good thing when they saw it, Glayne reflected wryly.

Gort Bro-Doral eyed him with amusement across the mammoth *borse* bowl. "Now really, Captain, why did you come here? Surely not to inform us of the decision of your sacred Policy Organ?" The Ruler of Ten Thousand Suns emitted an odd, explosive noise that corresponded to laughter.

To the Delban leader's question Glayne replied cautiously, "The Guardians have landed on their feet in every major crisis for the last thousand years. Perhaps we want to land feet-first this time."

"That is quite understandable, Captain," replied Gort Bro-Doral, cautious in his turn.

"When one side in a battle has unlimited strength," Glayne continued, "the wise man has no difficulty in deciding whom he will support. That is similar to our own position, Your Excellency."

Again Bro-Doral produced his strange, whinnying laugh. "Really, Captain, you amaze me. The future Delban Empire cannot tolerate such things as mercenary armies and space fleets—nor do we need such organizations to win our battles now. But, if you could bring yourself to the point of forgetting your traditions and other related paraphernalia of which you are so fond, then there is a possibility that you might be absorbed into the Delban Space Navy. Of course, you would have to submit to our commands—but that's understandable . . ."

Glayne exulted inwardly. The Bro simply saw them begging for a crumb of the spoils—he enjoyed his power to humiliate the Stellar Guardians. But what he didn't see, contrary to the old adage, was going to trim his scrawny neck. Where were Niala and Ganser? A minute to go!

"Your conditions are rather harsh, Your Excellency," he said, looking around for Niala. "But perhaps tomorrow. . . ?"

"Yes. Tomorrow by all means, Captain. And it will be a formal occasion this time." Again Bro-Doral produced his explosive laugh, glancing obliquely at Glayne from beneath lowered eyelids. Amusement at the Guardian's plight bubbled in the depths of his otherwise fathomless black eyes.

A SUDDEN series of shocks made the floor shudder and Glayne's heart jumped to his throat. Harbin had struck! Out of the corner of his eye he perceived Niala thrusting a big, black Cardy into Ganser's back, concealing it beneath his cape. Glayne drew his own and thrust it into Bro-Doral's ribs.

"Keep laughing, damn you!" Glayne instructed. "Walk to the roof elevator—casually." Glayne's eyes flickered rapidly about the room. Niala was right behind him with the staggering and nonplussed General Ganser. He thrust his weapon into the fold of his jumper before it could be seen. Repeated tremors shook the floor—Harbin must be digging them out with a secondary Kellander, he thought fleetingly.

"You must be insane!" choked the Master of the Cosmos. "The roof guards—the palace guards and my own personal men

will blast you down before you can set a foot outside this room!"

"*Just—keep—laughing!*" Glayne said, emphasizing every word. One or two of the guests looked at them curiously as they approached the massive doors, then turned away indifferently. The trembling had ceased. That meant that Harbin had cleared away the immediate defenses—but Glayne knew it would be a race with the reinforcements.

The doors were opened before them by attendants—slowly and with agonizing dignity. Two hawk-eyed Delban guards glanced at them sharply as they entered the corridor that led to the Bro's private apartment and the crucial fifth level roof elevator. Ever so slowly they moved down the corridor. It was a snail's pace to Glayne. Gort Bro-Doral laughed—or gasped in his sickly, explosive manner. He gestured. He spoke to Glayne, waving his arms in a deprecating manner. And all the while the Guardian looked innocently into the Delban's tormented features, his hand clinging wetly to the Cardy in the folds of his jumper.

They met no more guards in the corridor; evidently the rest of them had hastened to the roof. But the first two were still eyeing them. Glayne could feel their stares burning into his back. Twenty feet separated them from the waiting elevator . . . fifteen . . . ten. Niala had drawn abreast with General Ganzer; the sick, the pale, the fuzzy-minded Intelligence Chief whose cunning was known throughout the Galaxy.

There was a sudden commotion behind them. Glayne cast a glance over his shoulder and saw the corridor rapidly filling with uniformed and heavily-armed Delbans. They commanded him to stop; he smiled back. They brandished their weapons; he waved back gaily, herding the prisoners into the open elevator. They rushed after him; he drew his Cardy gun, crouched, and fired with murderous effect. Then he lunged into the elevator and jabbed the roof stud.

Swiftly it rose. Glayne turned to the two Delbans. The Ruler of Ten Thousand Suns was in a blue funk but General Ganzer had pulled himself together a bit. His heavily-veined, crimson eyes blazed furi-

ously at the kidnapers.

"Be careful with the General," Glayne warned. "He is dangerous when sober."

She managed a weak smile and thereby jumped another ten points in Glayne's esteem. The elevator sighed to a stop and the heavy door slid open, letting the dry wind pluck at them. Glayne turned his blaster on the controls, fusing them into tangled slag. Then he crept to the open door, crouched, and surveyed the palace roof in the pale, rosy illumination shed by one of Sterle's just-risen moons.

On his left, not a hundred yards away, lay the flier from the *Algol*. Three gunners from the crew were operating a portable Kellander, firing along the edge of the anti-energy shield which had been generated from the flier to prevent other Delban roof emplacements from destroying the little assault force. The rest of the attacking group manned Delban energy projectors that were still in operating condition, sending a heavy fire into possible concentration points for an enemy counter-attack. Bodies—mostly Delban—sprawled everywhere.

"We'll have to run for it," Glayne said. "They've erected an anti-shield between us and the flier. Once we gain that, we're safe."

Niala nodded and prodded the two prisoners out of the elevator. Bending low, they ran diagonally across the roof toward the shimmering ovoid that was the anti-shield. They had not gone more than forty steps before a counter-attacking wave of Delban palace guards suddenly appeared on their right. Cursing, Glayne doubled about and increased his pace in order not to be cut off. "Glayne! Slow down . . . I can't keep up," the girl panted.

The Guardian glanced anxiously back at her just in time to be struck full force by General Ganzer's flying body. They went down together in a wild tangle of thrashing arms and legs. The Delban, in spite of his dissipation, was tough and wiry; his long fingers sought Glayne's throat and clung to it with a vise-like grip. In vain the Guardian battered his body with sledge-hammer blows of his fists. Somewhere he had lost his gun. A black film threatened to engulf his consciousness as he struggled against the strangling grip

of General Ganser. Vaguely he felt the roof on which he lay tremble from the impact of the energy beams that smashed into it.

From far away he heard Niala scream. It was a bitter spur to his flagging strength. Summoning every last reserve, he tore Ganser's clutching hands from his throat and flung him down to the roof. Not done yet, the Delban snatched up Glayne's weapon which had fallen in the first seconds of the combat and lifted it to fire. Furiously Glayne launched his booted foot at Ganser in a savage kick. Bones crunched as it caught him full in the face and the impact sent him spinning.

Glayne scooped up the Cardy gun and searched desperately for Niala. The Delban palace guard continued to storm the little Guardian stronghold, but the fire of the defenders took horrible effect on their ranks. In the darkness he saw Niala's crumpled form on the roof. And almost immediately afterwards he saw Gort Bro-Doral fleeing to the safety of his attacking soldiers. Holding his breath, Glayne tried a long range shot. But it was to no avail. The Supreme Overlord had made good his escape.

ANXIOUSLY Glayne bent over the girl who was just beginning to stir. There was a nasty welt on her forehead.

"I'm all right," she gasped, rising to her feet. "Where's Bro-Doral? Did he get away?"

Glayne nodded grimly. "Yes, but never mind. We've got this one. Hurry!"

Grunting, he swung Ganser's supine form to his shoulder and ran panting to the edge of the anti-shield. He halted a pace before the shimmering field and pulled a dark-colored disc from his pocket. Set beforehand to the shield frequency that Harbin would use, its purpose was to nullify a small section long enough for them to slip through.

Hastily his fingers flipped the trigger and it began to vibrate furiously in his hand. Instantly an irregular opening flickered in the lethal shimmer of the shield. Glayne shoved the girl through, then darted after her with Ganser over his shoulder.

Harbin waved joyously at them from the

flier turret, his youthful face wreathed in smiles. "We can't hold them much longer," he shouted. "They're nullifying the shield with field scramblers. Hurry!"

Right behind Glayne as he steered Niala through the lock and leaped in behind her came the portable Kellander crew, still firing as they backed the gun into the flier. With a *clang* the locks slammed shut and the flier's driver engines thundered. With a single motion of his arm, Harbin released the anti-shield and fed the pent-up driver power to the jets. With a tremendous heave that crushed Glayne back rigidly in his seat the flier blasted up from the palace roof.

Harbin flung the flier around in a screaming turn and thundered low over the vast forest preserves that surrounded the palace. The tall, scraggly trees seemed to brush against the ship's stubby fins as Harbin sought to evade enemy pursuit. Grunting with effort, Glayne clambered up to the nose of the craft and sank back into a shock seat beside the pilot.

Grimly the Guardian Captain peered ahead at the huge, featureless ovoid of grey which was fast rushing down upon them. It was the palace defense shield. If it was the new type, then they were licked because nothing could get in or out. But the two-way shields were dangerous and unnecessary as protection for a natural siege position like Gort Bro-Doral's palace. Hence Glayne had concluded that the Delbans would keep their old style shield.

Or had he made a mistake in his reasoning? Glayne tensed unconsciously as the tiny flier flashed toward the grey ovoid. It was all or nothing. And suddenly the flier slashed through it like so much paper.

Glayne suppressed a sigh of relief at the vindication of his logic. Now the flier was hurtling over Sterle Capital. Harbin, in an effort to avoid enemy detectors, was almost flying down the very streets. Their wild gamble almost looked as if it would pay off. Glayne hoped fervently that Grayson had managed to evade the two Delban escort destroyers that had accompanied them to the space-port. The *Algol* would be a sitting duck over Topo Gulf until the flier arrived.

But after that, Glayne thought grimly, they were clear. No matter how much

power the Delbans could receive from their astounding transmitter, they could not withstand a sustained ten G thrust like his crew of heavy planet men. Then he thought of Niala, accustomed to Terran Standard. He bit his lip. She would just have to take it; there was no other way.

The flier had left Sterle Capital far behind and was climbing rapidly into the stratosphere. Evidently the surprise attack had disorganized the Delban patrols and drawn them like flies to the city. At any rate, not one was in sight as their flier streaked over Topo Gulf.

Feverishly Harbin doubled the flier back and forth, searching the conic broadcast beam of the *Algol*, undetectable behind her inert screen. Finally a welcome series of dots and dashes crackled from the receiver and Harbin brought the flier around in a screaming turn to follow the directional beam. Cautiously he slowed the craft as the intensity of the signals increased. Suddenly the reception man gaped at them out of grey nothingness—and the flier shuddered to a stop at the *Algol's* landing dock.

Hastily Glayne jumped out of the flier and hurried to the navigation bridge, dropping Niala in her quarters along the way. Harbin would take General Ganser—the precious, indispensable Ganser—to Surgery for facial repairs.

Graysen nodded at him, as taciturn as ever. "Your orbit, Captain?"

"Anywhere," Glayne replied. "Anywhere, just so long as we get far enough out of this system to drop into sub-space." He rubbed his bristly chin for a moment, thinking. "Make it eight G's," he added.

Graysen acknowledged and turned away. Almost immediately the inert screens were dropped and a floor began to build under Glayne's feet. By the time he had mounted to the Captain's Station, he was panting with effort. Automatically he jabbed an anti-thrust surette into his arm and felt his muscles relax instantaneously under the influence of the magic drug.

The inter-ship communicator phones gurgled over his head for a couple of seconds, then Brodis' voice issued from the speaker: "The General is floating up to his ears in verchromynal, Captain. They're putting his face back together right now. Give the

word and I'll go to work on him, thrust or no thrust."

"No," Glayne replied. "We'll make sub-space in a few hours. Then we'll have all the time we need to pump him. And, Lieutenant . . ."

"Sir?"

"Prepare the General's very own treatments for him."

Brodis paused for an appreciable instant, then said, "Right, Captain," and cut off.

Glayne watched the globe of Sterle II diminish in his battle screen with deep satisfaction. The first step in his plan had been carried off with miraculous good fortune. Now the most pressing necessity was speed. Once the *Algol* was sufficiently far from mass to drop into sub-space, the mysterious power source of the Delbans would be only a couple of hours distant at the most. With Ganser under control and acting as a safe conduct, Glayne saw success dangling just within his fingers.

Yet deep within his nether-mind he felt a twinge of foreboding—as if he had forgotten some vital factor in his calculations. The dim awareness was almost on the threshold of prescience, but it was too indistinct for him to make out clearly. Un- easily he sought to ignore it but could not.

VI

IN SUB-SPACE TIME CREPT along in low gear. Glayne was aware of the fact that five hours in sub-space corresponded to about forty minutes in flat, normal space due to the difference in time rates. But time was time, whether fast or slow. General Hotch Ganser also realized that time was passing; in fact, he exerted every effort to increase the length of time the *Algol* would have to remain in sub-space.

Sullenly he stared at Brodis and Glayne as they stood over him. There was a hint of amusement in the depths of his peculiar, crimson eyes.

"You deserve congratulations in the success of your attack, Captain Glayne," he said mockingly. "A touch of bravado here, a bit too audacious there . . . but, all in all, quite well executed. His Excellency will remember it for a long time. In fact,

your success now will add to his delight at witnessing your Vibra-Death later."

Glayne suppressed an involuntary shudder. What a fertile imagination the Delban had!

"Shut up!" snapped Brodis with disgust in his voice. "You might as well make it easier for yourself, Ganser. Relax your mind barriers or we will smash them down and drag the information from you. Either way, we'll get it in the end!"

Ganser sneered at the young Guardian. "I can loosen him up with some physical persuasion, Captain," suggested Brodis hopefully.

Ganser made an obscene remark which brought Brodis to his feet, enraged. The young officer was on the verge of clobbering him with a meaty fist, but Glayne stopped him.

"Such an old veteran as the General is certain to have taken the precaution of having automatic anesthesia cultures introduced into his blood stream," he said. "He would like nothing better than to have you strike him because the sustained trauma of physical pain would trigger the anesthesia and make him unconscious for as long as forty-eight hours."

Ganser made a mocking bow to Glayne.

The Guardian Captain rubbed his cheek wearily. Nothing else but the Ganser conditioner probe now, he realized. He caught Brodis' eye and moved his head slightly in the direction of the gleaming mass of coils and the huge helmet which was the Ganser conditioner.

Brodis nodded. With the aid of a couple of the technicians he set the helmet down carefully over the General's bald pate.

"Have you ever tried these wonderful treatments of yours, General?" Brodis inquired with clinical detachment. "They eliminate all your worries in instants, I understand. They can even make a new man of you, I'm told."

Ganser remained obstinately silent as the massive helmet was adjusted about his head and clamped to the chair in which he was secured. In spite of himself Glayne admired the Delban's strength of will. He, if anyone, should know the mental anguish of the conditioner. But now it was dog eat dog, kill or be killed, and the devil take the

hindmost. He nodded imperceptibly to Brodis who was waiting for the signal to begin.

Hours passed and Glayne cursed each inexorable minute. He and Brodis and the four grey-faced technicians were wet with perspiration. Ganser drooped in the chair, but his crimson eyes still blazed with fanatical hatred.

"Lord, what barriers!" whispered Brodis. He stared with fascination at the indomitable Delban.

"What is the power source?" Glayne asked repeatedly, holding his face impassive through sheer force of will. "You want to help us, Guardian. Tell us about the broadcast power."

The conditioned self was slowly beginning to take shape in Ganser's mind. It offered a new set of values, new goals and desires, uppermost of which was to give all possible aid to the Stellar Guardians. Thus the Ganser-personality they were so painstakingly superimposing upon the Delban was almost that of a Stellar Guardian. Gradually they saw it appear in the Delban's crimson eyes.

"The Tane Jewel," he whispered. "Found it in space . . . no bigger than a Terran grapefruit. Engineers . . . found way to drain its power potential . . . almost infinite."

The Tane! The Flame-Jewel of the Elder Tane!

GLAYNE was stunned. He remembered the legends he had heard of the incredible Tane—weird creatures who had ruled the Galaxy long before the existence of protein life forms. He even recalled the tales of their fabulous Second Universe in which they had sought refuge in order to maintain an artificial stasis and escape extermination. Ever since the discovery of the Tane legends, scientists had speculated about the Second Universe and the titanic source of power it represented. And now it had been found by the Delban Empire and was at the disposal of Gort Bro-Doral.

What had Ganser called it? A *Jewel*—and no larger than a grapefruit! Incredulously Glayne snapped a glance at one of the technicians who was watching the jerk-

ing movements of the lie detector stylus on its graphed scroll. The man looked up and nodded, his mouth a tight line across his face.

Glayne turned back to the Delban prisoner. "Where is the power broadcast from, Guardian?" he asked urgently.

"Tjadlinn," muttered Ganser, under the control of a pseudo-Guardian personality. "Jorger Sun . . . deep helio orbit. The planetless Jorger Sun—remember, *we* were commissioned to clear it of meteor drift. Later *they* built the Tjadlinn discoid around the Jewel . . ."

Glayne smiled mirthlessly. So the Delbans had planted the Jewel right under their noses. Yet what more logical place! He recalled the job he had supervised there five years before. The Delbans were going to build a power research station in an orbit about the planetless sun—a practice common in many Sectors.

Glayne tensed as he leaned toward Ganser to ask a third question. It was the crucial one and the others knew it. There was a hushed silence as Glayne asked:

"What is the frequency of the Jewel power broadcast? What do you know about the design of the mesh receiving antennae? Tell us, Guardian. We need your help."

Silence followed Glayne's question. It lengthened and became unbearable.

At last: "The mesh antennae are manufactured at the secret Karkara Fleet Station on Scone III. It is defended by Jewel-powered Kellander batteries in addition to secondary auxiliary projectors. The approach code is not available to me. Neither is there information available on broadcast frequencies or antenna design."

Glayne smashed his fist against his leg in violent disappointment. The facts were simply not available in Ganser's mind, so the pseudo-Guardian personality naturally failed to produce them. Again Glayne felt a twinge of respect for the Delban. If anyone knew the technical secrets of the Jewel broadcast, it should have been Ganser. But the Delban's wily cunning had thwarted them. He had carefully avoided all technical knowledge of the Jewel, anticipating an attempt to drain his mind.

There was only one course open to him

now. Attack Tjadlinn! He looked at his wrist-chrono. Twelve hours they had spent in this nether-space! It was inconceivable. Glayne swore to himself and thought furiously.

According to Ganser, the mass of the Tjadlinn discoid was too slight to maintain an interstellar telephone; only message craft connected it with the rest of Bro-Doral's empire. That was a break, thought Glayne. In spite of the time they had spent in sub-space, they might still reach Jorger Sun before a warning came from Sterle II. With Ganser under their control and posing as a guide, they could bluff through the outer defenses of the Jewel station. Once inside, they would have to take the breaks as they came.

His shoulders suddenly sagged at the appalling decision he would have to make. Once within the discoid, he would be cut off from outside communication and could not warn the fleet if anything went wrong. On the other hand, the fleet had to be standing by or there was no possible chance of success. Desperately he sought for alternatives to his scheme but none presented themselves. The Terran Combine's last chance rested within his own hands, he realized grimly. An immediate decision had to be made. But if he failed. . . .

With sudden resolve he crushed out his burning doubts and turned to Brodis. "Take the fastest flier we have, dope yourself up with verchromynal, and go to the Stellar Guardian Communication Station at Zandrome. They generate enough power there to push a message over the interstellar telephone to Dorleb in thirty-five minutes. Contact Admiral Garstow. Give him all the information we have and tell him that Scone III will be without Jewel power in forty-eight hours. Have him advise Admiral Bardled of the Terran Fleet that his aid is essential. Inform Garstow that every available fleet unit *must* be at Scone III in forty-eight hours. Hurry!"

Brodis reached the door in one jump and was halfway down the corridor in another. Glayne watched him go, bleakly phrasing the rest of the message under his breath. *Garstow, he thought, you will be slaughtered if there's one tiny slip on*

my part. It's good you don't know about it.

Then Glayne shrugged and went up to the navigation bridge.

JORGER SUN was barely visible through the glassene observation ports. But it blew up hugely in Glayne's auxiliary battle screen—a white dwarf of brilliant intensity and a temperature equal to that of the greatest white super-giants in the main galaxy. It was incredibly *alone* out on the furthest reaches of the vast, trailing arms of the galaxy.

The *Algol* was decelerating as it flashed toward Jorger Sun. Somewhere behind it was the Tjadlinn discoid built around the fabulous Tane Jewel. It would look strange, Glayne knew, if they were detected in a maximum ten G deceleration thrust while on an official inspection tour—especially with their low-gravity guide, General Ganser, aboard.

Commander Graysen approached, shifting his weight from one gnarled leg to the other in the space-man's shuffling gait. His leathery face widened in a rare grin as he reached Glayne. "I should have retired after that last cruise," he wheezed. "Here is Harbin for last minute instructions, Captain."

Glayne nodded to the younger officer. "Harbin, you will take over when Commander Graysen and I leave with the landing party. If you are fired upon while we are inside the discoid, clear out fast. Take the *Algol* to Scone III as quickly as possible. Warn Admiral Garstow that my plan has failed and that it would be best to disperse all fleet units. Under no conditions are you to attempt battle. Do you understand?"

"Aye, sir!" snapped the youngster. His face worked for an instant, but he suppressed his protest and brought himself under control.

"Destination in sight, Captain Glayne," called the pilot over the communicator.

"Cut deceleration to four G's." To Graysen: "How is Ganser?"

"In excellent shape—even his face. According to Psych he is completely under control."

Glayne turned back to his screen and

stared at the expanding Tjadlinn discoid. Instinctively he looked for the slim and deadly Jewel-powered cruisers that would be waiting for them if a warning had reached Tjadlinn. But of course he saw nothing. If they were there, they would be masked by inert detector screens, waiting for him to approach so closely that no amount of frantic acceleration could tear him from their grasp.

The discoid was a huge thing of beralloy, all of ten kilometers in diameter. About half-way from the center he could make out the landing dock as Ganser had indicated. He could also make out the evil snouts of Kellander projectors sprouting in clusters on Tjadlinn's metallic surface. Even as he watched, they wheeled about ominously, coming to bear on the decelerating *Algol*. Were they simply taking precautions, Glayne wondered, or were they capily waiting for him to climb right down the barrels of their projectors?

As he stood alone before the battle screen he suddenly felt a small hand touch his. He looked around. It was Niala Chodred, subdued and somewhat apprehensive. She looked up at him intently, forcing him to meet her eyes.

"I believe you are planning to leave me behind in the ship when you land at Tjadlinn, aren't you?"

Glayne winced at the slight accusation in her eyes. A sudden wave of nervous irritation welled up in him and he was on the verge of hurling a curse at her and driving her back to her quarters. But the tenderness in her eyes made him feel guilty because of his hasty mood and he relented.

"Yes," he said. "I'm very sorry. The ship is unsafe enough as it is, but down there—" he gestured at the image of Tjadlinn in the screen, "—down there will be fighting and certainly many casualties."

"But if I am present," she pointed out logically, "they will be much less likely to suspect you of hostile intentions."

"How do you think I would feel if you were killed down there?" Glayne asked, avoiding her eyes.

"How do you think I would feel if you were?" she countered.

Glayne turned to her, about to point out another difficulty, then said nothing. Suddenly she was in his arms and he felt his senses swim at her touch. For a timeless instant he forgot everything but the warm, laughing, green-eyed Niala whom he held in his arms.

VII

TJADLINN WAS GIGANTIC. IT rotated on its central axis once every forty hours and completed a revolution about Jorger Sun once every eighty-five years. The orbit was like that of a comet; at perihelion its velocity approached seventy miles per second. Now it had begun its journey away from the sun, swinging out into the infinite blackness of the lonely void.

Grimly the Guardian Captain looked at his crewmen, sturdy big-planet men like himself. There were six of them. Glayne wondered how many would be left when they returned—if they ever did return. He looked at the girl and wondered if she would return. She smiled at him as the artificial planetoid loomed hugely over their tiny landing launch. He felt no regret that she was along—his mind ignored all such feelings of that nature now. Instead it was concentrated to the highest degree of receptivity, sorting and classifying the sense impressions that came to it.

The massive beralloy portals of the outer air-lock gaped open at them and the launch jettied inside. Then they closed with a thunderous *clang* and the inner doors slid open in an oddly obsequious fashion. They were much less ponderous than the outer doors, Glayne noted. A moment later the launch came to rest and General Hoteh Ganser, Chief of Delban Intelligence, stalked out of the cabin followed by representatives of the Stellar Guardians, now allied with the Delban Empire.

There was a group of high-ranking Delban Army and Fleet officers awaiting them as they stepped from the launch. They bowed ceremoniously to Ganser, then to Glayne and his party as they were introduced. The Guardian smiled, he bowed, he clicked his heels solemnly—but all the time his hand was casually resting inside

of the fold of his jumper on the Cardy gun there.

The only name Glayne remembered was that of the commander of Tjadlinn discoid: Admiral Selzi-Narfid, Right Royal Protector of the Emperor's Hunting Preserves. But he was not notable because of his absurd title; rather, it was the hint of amusement that Glayne fancied he saw flickering in the depths of his jet black eyes.

It was Selzi-Narfid who turned to Ganser and said: "I'm sure you must be weary after your arduous journey, Your Excellency. Won't you and Captain Glayne and his party partake of some refreshment?"

Glayne frowned. That was not so good. They could not afford to waste time eating and drinking because the message craft might bring the warning from Sterle II at any minute. Yet how could they refuse?

Evidently this same train of thought flashed through the conditioned intellect of General Ganser. For just an instant he paused before saying yes, they would be delighted.

Again Selzi-Narfid bowed and this time Glayne was positive he saw mockery in the Tjadlinn commander's eyes. Following him, they entered a large mono-car poised on its single, gleaming span by gyros. It started with a jolt, picked up speed, and was presently bulleting down the tunnel, the walls a blur on either side. To Glayne it almost seemed as if they were moving down hill.

"You will notice the gravity attraction increasing as we progress," began Selzi-Narfid. "That is because we are approaching the Jewel. It is considerably more comfortable in my quarters close to the center. On the periphery of the discoid one has almost no weight because of the distance from the Jewel.

"No one knows the exact mass of the Tane Jewel. Probably around two hundred million tons, it is thought. Naturally it is not safe to approach too closely—the inverse square law, you know. Within a few meters the attraction is so tremendous that we have great difficulty in anchoring the power drain machinery. But you will see for yourself in the Jewel Chamber."

The mono-car sighed to a halt and Selzi-

Narfid ushered them graciously into a tapestried corridor. Glayne noticed that the gravity was just about Terran Standard. He also noticed that Selzi-Narfid, in spite of his flow of suave conversation, was worried. Suddenly a peculiar sensation of *wrongness* flared up in Glayne's mind and he knew that his battle-trained, preternatural intuition was at work. His hand tightened on the Cardy and his eyes flickered everywhere but could discover nothing.

At the wide entrance stage the Admiral held back, gesturing for Ganser, Glayne, and the others to precede him. The small hairs on the back of Glayne's neck arose as they entered the luxurious suite of the Tjadlinn commander. Something was definitely very wrong.

THEN sick dismay scalded up in the pit of his stomach. He saw what was wrong. It was Gort Bro-Doral who faced them, a Cardy gun in his hand.

Calmly the Delban Overlord fired at Ganser. The energy beam lashed into the pseudo-Guardian, making a big, ragged hole where his belly had been.

Glayne could do nothing more than stare helplessly. He did not even think to resist when the room filled with armed Delbans who went about the job of disarming them in a very silent and efficient fashion.

"Such a pity," remarked Gort Bro-Doral, glancing down at Ganser's charred and crumpled body. "Hoteh was my right hand, but the poor wretch was just too thorough. His own mind conditioning device caught him in the end." He produced his sickly, explosive laugh and inclined his head to one of the armed Delbans. "Take it away," he murmured.

"How did you get here so quickly?" Glayne said, asking the question uppermost in his mind. He was bewildered to think of the incredible acceleration the low-gravity Delban must have undergone to have beaten the Guardian ship.

"Another of the wonders of the glorious Tane Jewel," replied Bro-Doral with amused condescension. "Theoretically it was always possible to project material bodies into sub-space directly from planetary mass in the same way that the immaterial waves of an interstellar telephone message

are cast directly into sub-space. Heretofore, however, there has never been sufficient power to form a shield around the material object strong enough to prevent its being completely crushed by the brutal space warp in the presence of mass. That difficulty vanishes when one has the unlimited power of the Tane Jewel at his disposal."

Glayne understood. Ganser, who had meticulously avoided all technical knowledge, did not know this. Consequently they had walked straight into a trap. Glayne's shoulders sagged as he looked around, savouring the taste of defeat. Tough old Graysen stood at his side, impotently balling his fists. His carefully picked crewmen were behind him, arms above their heads. They looked grim and ready for anything. But Niala . . .

Glayne fought down the painful lump in his throat. It made no difference. They had the *Algol*, too. So it mattered not at all whether she came along or stayed behind, he told himself. They had only one thing to look forward to—and that would be unpleasant. Surprisingly he touched the massive ring on his hand. It contained a single blaster charge. Shakily he resolved to use it on Niala when it came to that.

Bro-Doral whinnied. "I have your day planned for you, Captain," he said. "I have often been accused of lacking a sense of justice, but you will see for yourself that such a charge wrongs me. Your men will be executed as humanly as possible. You and the esteemed Graysen will be given a chance to witness the destruction of your ship. And then—" the Delban snickered, "—the Vibra-Death! The girl . . . I'm not sure. Yes, it will take some thought. But you may be sure that it will be interesting."

Bro-Doral's sadism was too much for Glayne. With a snarl of animal hatred he leaped at the Delban Overlord, brushing aside his Cardy gun and reaching for his throat. The force of his lunge carried them back a few steps and the Bro tripped. Glayne, blazing with blind rage, lifted his foot to crush the Bro like a worm. At that instant a cold beam lanced into his back. Its icy fingers played along his spine and paralyzed him with numbness. Help-

lessly his arms fell to his sides and two of the armed Delbans came up behind him, supporting him to prevent his falling.

Gort Bro-Doral clambered up from the floor. His heavily-veined eyes were red with insane ferocity. He thrust his contorted face close to Glayne's own and said: "Guardian, you will now be extended another privilege. You will be permitted to see the girl writhing in the agonies of the Vibra-Death!"

Bro-Doral turned to one of his men. "Take those crewmen away—execute them," he said. "Keep the girl here under guard while I show the two officers around."

Glayne was horrified at the fruits of his unthinking attack on the Bro. It was almost as if he himself had pulled the switch which would subject Niala to the most infamous nerve torture ever devised. Dully he realized that he could not even lift his hand to administer a merciful death with the clean, fast energy beam of his ring.

"The paralysis will wear off in a minute or two, Captain," observed Bro-Doral. He had completely regained his self-control. "Since you have exerted so much useless effort to destroy our Tane Jewel, I think you ought at least be permitted to see it. But after that—" he sighed expressively, "—after that, we will procrastinate no longer."

Even before the effects of the cold beam had worn off completely, Bro-Doral nodded to his men and they took him by the arms and escorted him from the room. In despair, Glayne tried to jerk his head around to see the girl. For the briefest of instants he saw her smiling bravely at him. Then his view was cut off by the door as the guards maneuvered his still half-paralyzed frame around it.

In a couple of moments Glayne was able to move under his own power. He turned to find Graysen staring anxiously at him, alert for the slightest command. Glayne nodded imperceptibly and examined the guards. There were six of them. He noticed wryly that they held cold-beam weapons in their long-fingered fists while the ones that really produced the fatal damage—the Cardys—hung in holsters at their sides. Trust them not to risk killing

their prisoners when so many more delightful methods presented themselves, he thought bitterly.

AS HE and Graysen were led side-by-side down a maze of corridors, their weight gradually increased. Along with it was the sensation of going down hill. Glayne's mind operated rapidly and with cold precision but the Delbans showed not the slightest weakness. Not even the increase in gravity seemed to annoy them. Nevertheless, Glayne resolved, he would risk everything on a sudden attack when they got as close to the Jewel as possible. There the conditions would be ideal for him. With eyes narrowed, he tried desperately to remember the turns they had taken through the winding corridors of the beralloy discoid.

As they progressed Glayne saw the tough, all-metal walls were more heavily buttressed with the massive beralloy supports. Selzi-Narfid saw the direction of his glance and said, "Those were necessary when we maneuvered the Jewel into the center of the discoid. You have no idea of what such a tremendous mass in a body the size of the Jewel can do when it is not balanced."

Glayne listened to the Admiral with just a part of his mind. His main attention was devoted to photographing mentally the warren of passages. Here and there he saw groups of Delban technicians, none of them armed.

Good, thought Glayne.

They reached the entrance stage of the Jewel Chamber. The beralloy walls here were nearly a meter thick. In single file the party crawled through the narrow opening that dilated ponderously in the entrance stage. Two very weary-looking guards snapped to attention as they passed, but almost immediately slumped back into their somnolent positions, exhausted by their abnormally increased weight.

Better yet, thought Glayne.

"This is the Jewel Chamber, Captain. It is the very heart of Tjadlinn," puffed Selzi-Narfid after he had crawled through the dilated entrance stage.

Glayne stared about the vaulted room curiously. It was shaped like the inside

of an oval, thick at the center but tapering off to nothing at the sides. They were standing on a balcony which was heavily buttressed and ran all the way around the Chamber past several other massive portals. In the exact center of the Chamber a kind of a nest was formed by the tremendously thick beralloy girders. Something burned there with a cold, golden brilliance that filtered through the interstices of the girders and etched them sharply in banded shadows about the heavy walls.

An uncanny sensation possessed Gayne as he gazed at the Jewel. A vague dread passed over him and he found himself wondering if the Elder Tane Gods would emerge from their crypt and wreak hideous vengeance on mere mortals for disturbing their sleep. Uneasily he crushed the fantasy that was rioting up in his mind and determined to look for something more practical.

He concentrated on the power drain machinery which hung in clusters from the massive girders. Obviously those mechanisms were far more delicate than their supports and could be sabotaged with comparatively little work. As he calculated he gradually became aware of Bro-Doral who was speaking:

"—were remarkable creatures. As you know, Tane legends exist in every part of the known galaxy. They even possessed immortality—but they lost it for all practical purposes when they failed to adjust their bodies to the expanding universe.

"While the universe expands, quanta emission frequencies remain constant. You are familiar, of course, with the shift in the wave length of the cadmium spectrum, taken over the centuries. Ages ago, emission frequencies were so long, relatively speaking, that energy liberation from protein organisms was impossible. That definitely rules out protein construction for the Tane—but just what they were composed of is unknown. At any rate, their bodies couldn't stand the shortened emission frequencies which overloaded their muscles. They exploded. Like a plague. Billions and billions of them must have died before they discovered the answer to

the strange death that was striking among them. And billions more must have died before their marvelous science was able to build the Second Universe, as the legends call it."

Gort Bro-Doral gestured at the Jewel which shed its cold, brilliant light about the Chamber.

"They enclosed themselves in that tiny ovoid crypt you see there," he went on. That was countless ages ago. Somehow they had managed to construct shields capable of withstanding the spatial expansion of the universe. Who knows—they may still live in their static crypt?

"As millions and millions of years passed, the Tane Jewel—the Second Universe, as the legends call it—slowly dwindled in size when considered in relation to our own universe. As it dwindled, its energy potential grew. Now its accumulated charge is so titanic that it defies conception.

"Some day those beautiful engines of the Tane Gods would have run down and the shield would have collapsed. Then our own universe would have been destroyed. The sudden release of such a vast energy potential would have caused a concussion which would literally warp our flat space into the fourth-dimensional sub-space.

"Now that can't happen. We are draining off that infinite potential and broadcasting it—flooding it—through sub-space to be received everywhere there is a Delban receiving antenna. The power is limitless. We Delbans will be the rulers of the universe just as the Tane Gods were of old. There is no limit to our power!"

Bro-Doral's eyes blazed with a pure lust for power as he stared exultantly at the green brilliance of the Tane Jewel. His mouth was slack and he breathed heavily from the effort of his speech. Selzi-Narfied, too, was tired. Wearily he rested against the support rail of the balcony. The guards blinked their large pop-eyes from fatigue, shuffling from one foot to another to promote circulation. Most of them had placed their weapons in holsters as Bro-Doral talked. That is, all except one. He still held his weapon loosely in his fingers at his side. Slowly and gently

Glayne poised, gathering his strength.

"Isn't it beautiful, Glayne?" mused the Delban Overlord, staring into the tiny radiant sun. "An artifact of the mightiest culture that ever existed. Now we will carry on in their footsteps. We will be the mightiest—"

VIII

THEN GLAYNE LEAPED. WITH one flailing fist he caught the Delban guard on his bony jaw and with the other he snatched the cold beam gun from his limp fingers. Whirling, he played it among the stupefied guards. Then old Grayson exploded into action, seizing Selzi-Narfid and hurling him bodily at Bro-Doral who was in the act of bringing up his Cardy gun. Three of the guards had collapsed and another was crumpling on his knees under Glayne's cold beam. The other two had crouched back in the shadows of the entrance portal, trying to bring their weapons to bear upon Glayne.

Graysen whirled and lunged at them, smashing one down with a single blow. The last guard on his feet, surprised and dismayed by this attack from the rear, fled to the portal and tried to dilate it. But he was too late and sagged in a heap under Glayne's hand weapon.

Scooping up two of the Cardy guns which had fallen to the balcony floor, Glayne shouted: "Pick up an energy gun, Graysen. Cut down the power drain machinery."

Graysen reached for an energy gun in the holster of one of the paralyzed guards. He never even saw Gort Bro-Doral scramble to his feet and fire point blank. His head disappeared as the Delban's beam struck full force. Glayne fired back wildly but he was off balance and missed. Before he could collect himself to fire again, Bro-Doral had fled to another stage and darted through the dilation.

Glayne whirled toward the Delbans. Selzi-Narfid had a broken neck and was obviously dead. The guards were all unconscious and would remain so for a long time.

Glayne turned back to the Jewel which cast its chill, gold light steadily through

the interstices of the surrounding girders. Calmly he leveled the Cardy gun and fired at it. As if it were so much water, the deadly little energy beam washed off the Tane Jewel and fused with the beralloy supports. It was as he had expected. Given several hours, the little hand weapon might have made an impression on the incredibly tough beralloy but Glayne had no time to lose.

As he had seen before, the power drain machinery which hung in clusters from the big beams and transmitted the energy through the heavy busbars looked to be the most fragile. Glayne wondered what would happen if he fired into them. There was only one way to find out. The muscles of his jaw hardened as he depressed the firing stud on the Cardy.

Nothing happened. He let the beam of his energy gun play up and down the clusters of power drains, fusing them into slag. Now the thin, invisible rays of power which the drains extracted from the Jewel no longer existed since they had no place to go. But nothing happened.

Then it occurred to him that nothing would happen in the Jewel Chamber itself. It needed no power for lights—the Jewel provided all the light needed. Heartened, Glayne blasted at every drain in reach, following the balcony around the Chamber.

But even this method, he realized, would take too long. Gort Bro-Doral would soon have squads of men hurrying into the Chamber after him. Grimly he wished he had an energy bomb. With one of those he could finish the job in a few seconds.

Suddenly he remembered an old Guardian trick. Hurriedly he began to tinker with one of the Cardy guns. By jamming a couple of the safety gadgets, it was possible to make the weapon fire out of phase. When the trigger stud was depressed, its tiny miatron coils would build up an unstable load in a couple of seconds, then explode. Quickly he fixed the weapon to his satisfaction, then hurried on around the balcony to find a suitable opening in the girders through which to hurl the ersatz bomb.

Halfway around, he met two panic-stricken Delban technicians. The instant they saw him they turned tail and ran

back through the portal. Obviously *something* must be happening, Glayne thought with grim satisfaction. Then he found a good spot, pressed the firing stud of the doctored Cardy gun, then flung it with all his strength into the remaining power drains. In an instant he had pivoted and lunged for the port of the entrance stage behind him, feeling in the shadow for its dilator stud.

It refused to open!

Obviously Glayne himself had sabotaged its power circuit. Now he was trapped in the Chamber and the ersatz bomb was about to explode. Tensely he crouched as far back in the recess of the port as he could and waited. With a terrific roar the bomb exploded in the confined Chamber, rupturing the membranes of his nose and crushing him violently against the port. Parts of the devastated power drains were hurled against the massive walls, then fell back to the Jewel. One of the heavy busbars had collapsed, ripping festoons of cables from the top of the Chamber which shorted violently against one another.

Dazed, Glayne pulled himself to his feet. Fortunately he had broken no bones. But one of his ear drums was ruptured and his nose bled unremittingly. He had lost his other Cardy. Hurriedly he felt about, found it, and thrust it into the fold of his tattered jumper.

He turned back to the port and found that the concussion had dilated it for him. Breathing heavily, he crawled through it into the inky blackness of the passages. On all sides he heard the sound of running footsteps. By touch he staggered into the blackness, realizing that he must keep going uphill, away from the Jewel's attraction.

The exertion cleared his head a bit. He knew he was lost, but he hoped to be able to find his way back to Selzi-Narfid's quarters. There he would find Niala and be oriented with the rest of the discoid.

Figures bumped into him in the blackness, hurrying to the scene of destruction. The Delbans were badly disorganized. Obviously they had not been prepared to cope with such devastation wreaked on their sacred Jewel. Not even to the extent

of auxiliary power for lights, he thought as he panted up the black passages.

EVEN as he thought about it, the lights began to flicker weakly in their fluorescent tubes, growing stronger with each passing second. Startled, Glayne crouched back in the shadow of a recess in the wall. That was Luck in all her perversity, he thought grimly. His hand sought the butt of the blaster in his jumper. Fortunately the lights did not wax as brightly as they had when the Jewel was still functioning, but that did not offer much consolation. He would be recognized instantly by the outline of his thick-chested body if he was seen in the corridor.

He noticed that fewer Delbans were passing. He decided to chance it. Tightly grasping the gun in his jumper, he crept from his hiding place and ran on the balls of his feet, dodging and ducking into shadows every time one of the enemy passed. Once he was seen and pursued by a squad of Delban guards. Breathlessly he ran at full tilt through a cross-corridor, up a flight of high steps, and twisted into another of the endless passages of the discoid.

The pull of the Jewel had become very slight. In fact it was much slighter than it had been in Selzi-Narfid's suite. Glayne pushed on, realizing that he was hopelessly lost. His only chance now was to find the mono-rail on which they had ridden from the landing dock to the Tjadin command's suite. It occurred to him that even if he did find Niala, they might never escape Tjadin. And it was absolutely imperative that he make contact with Garstow at Scone III. The slightest delay on the part of the Stellar Guardian Admiral in attacking the Karakara Station might give the Delbans the precious time they needed to repair the damage he had effected.

There were two entrance stages, one on either side, in the corridor through which he was hurrying. He tried one and found it was locked. He was more fortunate with the other. It creaked open slowly when he flipped the dilator stud. Tensely, hand on the Cardy gun in his jumper, he crept through the port.

It was the landing dock!

Glayne's heart jumped with delight as he crouched back in a shadow and examined the place. Not a hundred meters away was the launch which had brought his party from the *Algol*. His eyes drank it in avidly and a plan for escape formed rapidly in his mind. A message craft of some sort was preparing to leave, he saw. As soon as the inner lock door closed behind it, he would smash the launch through it and the air pressure would fling him out of the discoid. How very simple!

Then the impact of the realization that he would have to leave Niala Chodred behind struck him. He was stunned by its very violence.

Leave Niala? Abandon her to Gort Boredal and his sadistic vengeance for the sabotage Glayne himself had performed? No! That was out of the question. But what of the Terran Combine? What did the life of Citizen Niala Chodred mean against the lives of the trillions who made up that Combine to which she had sworn allegiance? Viewed in that light, it was obvious that the life of one person was a cheap price to pay for security of the Combine against the Tane Jewel.

Glayne crouched in the shadow and buried his face in his hands. In an agony of indecision he prodded his weary mind to discover an alternative to the horrible dilemma. But he could find none. He would have to decide between Niala, the laughing, green-eyed Niala, and the ideal of human progress which he had sworn the Guardian Oath to protect.

Dully he realized that the power of the abstract was too strong. He would forsake Niala. The pain redoubled itself as he made his decision but he set his face in a granite-mask against it. Unfortunately it was not so easy to quell the agony that burned within him.

Grimly he stood up. He saw that the time had come for action. The message craft was slowly jetting down the cinder blastway toward the lock door. Glayne tensed for an instant, then raced for the launch, covering ten meters at a stride in the light gravity. Three Delban mechanics caught sight of him as he rounded

the stubby fins and leaped for the lock. In mid-stride he whipped out his Cardy gun and brought them down in charred heaps.

A guard squad saw him and fired. Their beams sang dangerously close, smashing into the beralloy side of the launch. They crunched down the blastway in pursuit as Glayne jumped through the open lock, slammed it shut, and darted to the controls. The atomic driver engine coughed and surged into life. He let it scream up beyond audibility, then fed power to the jets. The blast washed over the guards who were closest to the launch and the others fell back hastily before its searing heat.

The inner lock of the entrance port had slid shut behind the message craft. It was now or never, Glayne realized. He opened the atomic driver wide and the stubby launch shuddered for an instant, then lunged for the lock. The sudden thrust created constricting hands about Glayne's chest and he fought precariously on the edge of blacking out. For a brief instant Glayne was aware of the huge outer doors swinging shut before him—and then the air pressure struck them and flung the launch bodily through the narrow space left between them.

The launch tumbled crazily end-over-end until Glayne straightened it out and oriented himself with Tjadlinn and Jorger Sun. He had just sighted the tiny gleaming speck of the *Algol* a dozen kilometers distant when something struck the launch a terrific blow. Almost instantly the tell-tales indicated air was escaping. Dismayed, Glayne shot a glance over his shoulder at the receding discoid. He discovered that they were firing at him with the secondary Kellander batteries, using auxiliaries to power the miatrons. Feverishly he changed course, zig-zagging wildly away from the discoid.

Due to over confidence, the Delbans had not destroyed the *Algol* immediately. They preferred to play cat and mouse. And now, with the titanic energies of the Jewel no longer available to them, they could not destroy the *Algol*.

The Kellander energy beams slashed dangerously close to the fleeing launch.

Not in salvos but by ones and twos. That meant that their fire control was badly disorganized—and it was that fact which saved Glayne. Harbin had raised the *Algol's* anti-shield when the Delbans had commenced firing but he had not turned tail as Glayne had ordered, realizing that the launch was fleeing in his direction.

Glayne flipped the stud of the shield-nullifier that was matched to the frequency of the *Algol's* anti-shield and darted the launch through it, braking with eye-searing blasts of the forward jets as the huge Reception Deck locks yawned open. With a heavy lurch, his battered craft came to rest inside the lip of the gaping outer doors.

IX

THE *ALGOL'S* OFFICERS formed a silent group beneath the huge glassene dome of the navigation bridge. They looked expectantly at Glayne as the elevator port dilated and he approached them, weary and unshaven, his face covered with blood.

Ignoring their unspoken questions, Glayne said brusquely, glancing at the navigation chrono, "Lieutenant Harbin: Compute an orbit for Scone III. Get the ship under way immediately . . . drop into sub-space at three ten to the seventh kilos from Jorger Sun. Thrust—eight G's."

He was about to turn on his heel when Harbin's hesitant voice stopped him.

"Sir . . . what . . . what about Commander Graysen and the others?"

Glayne stared at the youngster bleakly. "Graysen is dead," he said with a flat voice. "So is Ganser. And I presume that our escort has been executed."

Harbin's youthful jaw tightened. "And Lieutenant Chodred?"

The lines about Glayne's mouth deepened. He let his gaze travel over Harbin's troubled face and the impassive faces of the rest of the ship's officers. He saw accusation in their eyes along with resentment and veiled hostility. He knew what they were thinking. Why should he be the only one to return. Why had he abandoned the others? And now they wanted to know what had happened to the girl. So he told them.

"She is still alive." Bitterly he wondered why Fate had designated her to be the only one left to face Gort Bro-Doral's vengeance. He looked up again at the silent cluster of officers. "If your curiosity is satisfied, gentlemen, suppose we get on with the war?"

"If Tjadlinn is without Jewel power," persisted Harbin stubbornly, "why can't we attack? We might be able to rescue Lieutenant Chodred. It's the least we could do—"

"Follow my orders!" Glayne cut in savagely. He turned on his heel and mounted to his shock seat in the Captain's Station. Yes, he thought bitterly, they could attack Tjadlinn, incur heavy damage on the discoid—perhaps even accomplish a miraculous rescue of Niala. But weighed against that was the possibility that the *Algol* might be heavily damaged or destroyed by the highly potent secondary Kellanders of the discoid. Unless he got through to Garstow, the conservative Grand Admiral of the Stellar Guardians was likely to delay his attack on Karkara—and such a delay would be suicidal.

Gradually a floor began to build under his feet and the *Algol* got under way. As the thrust increased, the discoid began to shrink in the distance. Glayne stared at its image grimly in the battle screen. He didn't say farewell because he knew he would be back. He rubbed his bristly cheek. He saw success now. He felt it on the tips of his clutching fingers. But something else was beyond his grasp now—something that made success dry and unpalatable. He covered his eyes with his hand as the thought stabbed him: The laughing, green-eyed Niala. . . .

THE Stellar Guardian fleet lay motionless across forty thousand kilometers of space when the *Algol* reached the rendezvous at Scone III. Admiral Garstow's anxious face formed rapidly in the featureless grey surface of Glayne's ship-to-ship communicator screen.

"Give me a fast, verbal report on the Jewel, Glayne," ordered the Admiral.

The Guardian Captain complied, rapidly sketching the main details of his sabotage and providing a rough outline of the Delban

defense of the discoid.

When he finished, Garstow nodded thoughtfully. "Do you think it advisable to risk an immediate attack on the discoid on the chance that we can knock it out before they repair the power drains?"

Glayne frowned, then said, "No. It's too long a chance. They will mass their fleet at Tjadlinn immediately. Under normal circumstances we could lick them, but if they repair that Jewel faster than I expect, then we'll be sitting ducks."

Garstow nodded again. "Lieutenant Brodis informed me of the plan you had in mind of attacking the Karkara Fleet Station on Scone III and thereby acquiring the Jewel power-receiving antennae. On the whole, I think that is the shrewder move. Since you've managed this show up to now, Captain, I think you might as well organize the attack."

"Thank you, sir," Glayne replied. "I'll take my own cruiser division in first to clear away what little resistance they'll put up. That will be the simplest part about it. The real difficulty will come when we install the antennae. As Brodis probably told you, we were unable to get any technical information from General Ganser."

Garstow rubbed his fleshy nose thoughtfully, then said, "It's in your hands, Captain." Then he cut out.

Rapidly Glayne organized the attack, placing his own cruiser division at the point of the spearhead. Smoothly the Stellar Guardian striking force flashed down on Scone III. As Glayne had anticipated, their sudden assault was little more than an armed landing. The Delbans were caught completely off guard. They put up a fanatical resistance with the auxiliary-powered Kellander secondary batteries, but the superior weight of Glayne's miatron blasters soon crushed every last shred of opposition.

As soon as the *Algol* had jetted down on the immense space-port of the Karkara Fleet Station, a group of technicians in addition to the landing party raced off to confiscate an antennae unit for the big ship. Glayne set up an operations unit in the glassene dome of the *Algol* to assign landing patterns to the other Guardian fleet units. The heaviest Cluster and Galactic

class warships he assigned to fast orbits about Scone to defend the ships which had already landed.

After he saw that landing operations were proceeding smoothly he descended to the engine room of the *Algol* to see how the installation of the antenna was progressing. Massive cables snaked across the deck in confusions, waiting to be hooked into the heavy buses which the technicians were jockeying into place. Outside on the hull, gangs of men were welding in the mesh antenna. Fuming, he looked at his wrist-chrono repeatedly.

"How much longer?" he asked Harbin impatiently.

"Thirty minutes at the most, sir," replied Harbin stiffly, refusing to meet Glayne's eyes.

Glayne rubbed his bristly cheek thoughtfully as he turned away. The young officer was determined to give him the silent treatment along with the rest of the officers in his crew. Word would spread; soon the whole fleet would hear of his cowardly negligence. He smiled thinly as he made his way back up to the navigation bridge. He had seen it happen before. There were just two ways to escape it. One was retirement. The other involved a Cardy gun placed at the temple. . . .

The red light of his personal communicator was blinking intermittently when he regained the bridge. It was Garstow.

"Glayne!" he barked abruptly, "Bardled is on his way in with the fleet of Imperial Terra. And a dozen other Sectors have massed their fleets and are on the way, too."

"Excellent," said Glayne. "We're working faster now. We've put the Delban technicians to work and repaired the damage to their assembly lines. We ought to be able to handle a thousand ships an hour. How long before Bardled will arrive?"

"Four hours . . . maybe six."

"I'm lifting in a few minutes," Glayne said. "When Bardled arrives, install the units in his heavy ships first. Those tubs will smash the Tjadlinn anti-shield if anything will."

Rapidly Glayne went on to sketch his plan of attack. When he finished, Garstow nodded ponderously. "Then we will sub-space as soon as we pick up the power

broadcast. A sound strategy, Captain. Good luck!" His face faded from the screen.

THE FIRST of the big Cluster class battleships were easing down on vast fingers of flame when Harbin reported that the work of installation was complete. In quick succession the other cruisers of his division reported readiness and he gave the command to blast off.

The *Algol* was almost two hundred million kilos below Scone System's plane of ecliptic when the hastily installed antenna unit began to pick up the first surges of power from the Tane Jewel. Cautiously the *Algol's* pilot experimented with it, accustomed himself to unlimited power at his finger tips. One by one, the ship's atomic drivers fell silent as the pilot gained confidence.

"Raise the anti-shield, Lieutenant Harbin," Glayne said crisply over his inter-ship phone. "We'll sub-space right now."

Harbin's image stared at him incredulously from the communicator screen for an instant but he fought down the words that trembled on his lips.

"Aye, sir," he snapped.

Glayne was grimly amused at his anxiety but said nothing to relieve it. They were dangerously close to mass, he knew, but if Gort Bro-Doral could blast into sub-space directly from Sterle II with a shield supported by Jewel power, then he ought to be able to get away with it at two hundred million kilos from mass.

Briefly Glayne communicated his intent to the commanders of the thirty other cruisers in his division and their anti-shields began to build. At his curt command they dropped smoothly into sub-space, their shield generators heating up slightly as the sudden strain hit them.

They plunged on through sub-space, building up to incredible velocities in that nether dimension where such commonplace things as mass and light did not exist. Glayne's mind worked rapidly, analyzing his plan of battle for any defects. Obviously the enemy would mass his fleet at the all-important Tjadlinn. If his calculations were correct, his cruiser division would pop into normal space right among them.

If they struck fast enough, they could disorganize the Delbans sufficiently for Gars-tow and Bardled to get in among them with the heavy units of their fleets. And that, he knew, would be the end of the Delban Grand Fleet.

The discoid was another matter. Paradoxically, it contained within it the very source of the power which they would use to destroy it. The only possible way the Delbans could deprive them of the Jewel power would be to turn off the non-directional broadcast entirely. That, however, would leave them open to an attack by the regular miatron batteries of the heavy Guardian and Terran battleships. They could not possibly hope to beat off such an attack with their Kellander secondaries. Hence, Glayne reasoned, they would keep up the power broadcast at all costs.

Satisfied with his plan, Glayne let his mind relax and drift where it wanted. Abruptly it turned to thoughts of Niala Chodred and he winced at the pain which filled him. Grimly, he realized that if the silent treatment by his fellow officers failed to ruin him, the bitter acid of remorse which burned his soul would certainly accomplish the job.

X

ONE INSTANT THE FLEET OF the Delban Empire was assembling about the vital Tjadlinn discoid in an orderly fashion. An instant later all hell broke loose amid its massed ranks.

Glayne's cruiser division popped out of sub-space at two hundred kilometers per second and flailed through the Delbans like a giant scythe. His eyes glued to the small battle screen in front of him, Glayne clipped off rapid commands over the ship-to-ship communicator that kept him in touch with the rest of his group.

Three Delban warships—one a battleship—had been caught with their shields down and were now exploding enthusiastically in nova-fashion. A dozen others had been heavily damaged by the slashing miatron beams as they vainly sought to lift their shields.

The *Algol* screamed in protest as the pilot flung her around to bore in again. Her

armored hide seemed to crawl in squealing agony at the twenty G turn. Glayne panted, on the verge of blacking out. Dimly he glimpsed the strained features of the pilot wracked with spasms of coughing that flung lobs of blood and lung tissue against the terraced banks of instruments at his side. . . .

Then they were among the Delbans again, slashing right and left with Kellander miatron beams. This time the Delbans were ready for them and replied with a vengeance. Torrents of energy smashed at the *Algol's* shield which shuddered like a live thing under the impact. Behind Glayne a knot of sweating gunnery officers rattled off firing data to waiting Kellander crews before the mammoth battle screen. Somewhere in the bowels of the ship the accumulators were screaming as they fed the Jewel energies from the antenna to the smoking banks of shield generators and the ravenous Kellander condensers. But dominating the ear-splitting crescendo of the *Algol* in full fighting stride was the continuous, ravening thunder of Kellander projectors as they flung their blasts at the Delban warships.

Glayne saw that his division had scattered widely—but, at the same time, the disorganization of the Delbans was even more evident. Unaware that the sudden attack was a feint to draw them away from Tjadlinn, a dozen Delban fleet divisions abandoned the Jewel to join the fray.

As the Guardian Captain scanned the screen, he saw that the tide was fast running in favor of the Delbans. The *Anza* was finished for the day. A flotilla of swift Delban destroyers had darted in with mines and torpedoes, one of which had gotten through her shield and exploded with a devastating energy concussion against her stern, sheering off plates and jet tubes by its force. The *Altor* and *Astrid* were cornered by a dozen Delban Galactics and Clusters and their shields coruscated in brilliant hues as they trembled on the point of collapse. A third Guardian ship, the *Aesir*, blasted in to offer aid and even as Glayne watched, hurled her energies in a concerted salvo at a point just below the jets of one of the Delban Clusters. Its shield coruscated brilliantly, tottered, and suddenly it was strewing its guts, nova-

fashion. Almost immediately the *Aesir* followed her example as a salvo of Galactic beams struck her amidships, rupturing her shield. A torpedo ripped into the bridge of the *Astrid* and she exploded in an eye-searing nova. The *Altor* managed to limp away in the confusion, her beralloy hide mangled and torn from a near miss.

The *Algol* herself was in trouble. Two Delban Stellers were hurling torrents of energy at her shield, making it coruscate in a blaze of overloaded power foci. A pack of destroyers was circling hungrily, looking for a chance to dart in and plant their seeds of destruction. The pilot maneuvered desperately, but the overloaded power lines could not shunt sufficient power through the drivers to pull them out of their difficulty.

Glayne swore, wondering where the rest of the fleet was. It couldn't go on much longer. The *Akkad* had novaed; the *Ashlar* and *Asgard* had disappeared without leaving a trace. Only six of his original thirty were in fighting shape—and even as he watched he had to revise it to five. The *Atlas*, surrounded by a dozen enemies, exploded in nova-fashion as her shield collapsed.

And then the void was suddenly full of great warships bearing the Guardian and Terran insignia, appearing magically in the midst of the Delbans. What had appeared to be triumph suddenly turned into a rout for the Delbans. Badly disorganized, they attempted to flee back to the safety of the mighty Kellander projectors of Tjadlinn.

BUT Glayne's annihilated cruiser division had done its work well; the Delbans, drawn too far from the discoid, were cut off by the fleets that opposed them. They fought desperately and fanatically, but there was only one possible outcome. One after another they exploded nova-fashion as the massed salvos of the tremendous Terran and Guardian battle ships swept aside their shields and touched destructive fingers to their beralloy sides.

Glayne's ship-to-ship suddenly crackled into life and Garstow's heavy face appeared on the screen. "My boy," he boomed, "I'm proud of you. Excellent work! We've bagged them all at almost no cost. Bardled

tells me he didn't lose a ship."

Glayne gazed stupidly at him for a moment before he could adjust himself to the idea of victory. Then he said quietly: "I have five ships left out of a command of thirty."

"Oh! . . . that's too bad," mumbled Garstow, his broad face becoming serious. "What I mean to say is—"

"The chaplain will say what needs to be said," Glayne cut in with unnecessary bitterness. "If you still want me to run this show, then I submit that we attack Tjadlinn without delay."

Admiral Garstow nodded, his face like a deflated balloon.

Quickly Glayne outlined his plan for the assault on the discoid itself. The battle would be fought between the Kellander accumulator and condenser capacity of the massed fleets and the total generator capacity of the mighty anti-shield which the Delbans would raise from the discoid. If the Delban shield capacity was less than the massed strength of the fleet, then the discoid would be destroyed. But if the Delbans held them off, they would try something else.

It took several hours to assemble the scattered and highly numerous Terran and Guardian warships into a closely-integrated formation. Matters were not helped by the appearance of dozens of warships from the fleets of other Sectors. They roamed about searching for enemy stragglers, but succeeded only in getting in the way. Finally, however, Glayne got them organized and the enormous fleet moved ponderously on Tjadlinn.

The Delbans waited behind their featureless grey shield, not firing a single Kellander blast at the advancing fleet. When it reached to within fifty kilometers of the discoid, Glayne gave the order to commence fire.

In the center of the huge discoid the Jewel, the Second Universe of the Elder Tane, blazed with a chill, golden luminescence. It did not waver a fraction as the tremendous energy demands struck it. The power drains fed voraciously of its infinite energies and flooded them into sub-space. The cumbersome mesh antennae on the hulls of the numberless ships

in the massed fleet gulped it up and transmitted it to screaming accumulators which in turn fed it to the ravenous Kellander condensers. They, in turn, cast it through the miatron projectors at the shield of Tjadlinn from whence it had emerged.

For minutes on end those titanic torrents of energy blasted at that phenomenal shield. But it held. The inconceivable energies could not crack it. Not even when every single accumulator and condenser in the massed fleets of the Terran Combine labored at peak capacity did the shield so much as tremble. Not even to the extent of a tiny spider web of coruscation along the power foci.

Glayne barked a command to cease fire. He saw that the hail of torpedoes and mines which they had strewn had penetrated the shield. But they had been detonated by roving beams from the Tjadlinn secondaries before they could strike the surface of the discoid. If they could get through that mighty barrier, Glayne reasoned, then so could the *Algol*. He peered into the battle screen, attempting to locate the mammoth landing dock of the discoid through its shimmering grey shield.

He made his decision. Garstow's face came to life on his communicator screen. Briefly he communicated his intention to the Guardian leader. When he had finished, Garstow nodded soberly and mumbled farewell.

When he learned that the *Algol's* Kellander batteries had been rigged to fire by remote control from the pilot's seat, Glayne contacted Harbin.

"Abandon ship!" he ordered laconically when the youngster's face filled the screen. "Wha—what?" blurted Harbin incredulously.

"I said," Glayne repeated curtly, "abandon ship. Make haste!"

"Aye, sir," said Harbin. His face still mirrored astonishment at it faded from the screen.

XI

GLAYNE SAT ALONE IN THE pilot's massive shock seat of the *Algol*. The instruments rose about him on all sides in terraced banks with the

battle screen directly in front of his eyes. Tentatively he reached for the firing studs, accustoming his fingers to their shape. When he saw that the last of the *Algol's* lifeboats had been picked up he realized that the time had come.

He transferred his gaze to the discoid that was vague and indistinct beneath its anti-energy shield. Fastening his eyes to the armored outer lock doors of the landing dock, he gently fed power to the drivers. The *Algol* shuddered and gradually picked up speed. Glayne dropped the anti-shield, realizing that he would never get through the barrier with the energized shield functioning. But once he was through, it would have to go up quickly or his ship would be shattered by the roving secondaries. Hand hovering tensely over the shield control, he guided the ship toward the landing dock.

His speed increased; at twenty kilometers he was streaking toward the discoid in a free fall, all energy sources quiet. Fifteen—ten—five—and the *Algol* was boring through the energy barrier, stormed and buffeted as it sought to impede the passage of the individual circuits. Suddenly she emerged *inside* the shield and Tjadlinn was rushing upwards.

Like lightning Glayne's fingers stabbed at the shield control and fed power to the drivers. He braked the ship crazily to avoid the lashing secondary beams that reached hungrily for him. Once . . . twice—and yet a third time the Kellander beams found the cruiser and slashed through her half-formed shield, dealing terrific blows to the plummeting ship.

Then the massive beralloy doors of the landing stage were expanding hugely in his screen and he braked with all the power he could shunt into the straining drivers. Somehow his clutching fingers found the Kellander firing studs and he lashed out repeatedly against the outer lock. It whitened, ran into slag, crusted, and flared again and again as the ravening bolts struck it. Desperately Glayne fought to prevent blackness encroaching on the corners of his vision.

Suddenly a rending, thundering roar filled the *Algol* and she was crashing headlong through the weakened beralloy doors

of the landing dock. But even above that deafening roar, Glayne could hear the scream of twisted and tortured metal. Then the big ship stopped moving and all was quiet except for the shriek of air escaping through the crevices around her mangled hull.

Groggily, Glayne shook his head in an effort to shake off the black-out which had engulfed his vision. In spite of his circulation exercises he couldn't see anything. Then a glimmering of the answer occurred to him and with wild surmise he experimentally flicked the firing stud of the ship's Kellanders.

Nothing happened.

Then Glayne understood. Every bit of the ship's power was cut off, including the lights and the battle screen. Obviously the Jewel power was cut off. Evidently the impact of the *Algol's* surmise had jarred the delicate power drains so that Tjadlinn was once again without power. But he'd have to make sure.

Heartened, he rose and took a space suit from the locker, checking to see if its light torch was operating. As he turned away, a vague, ridiculous hope struck him. He took a second suit from the locker.

TWISTED and buckled beralloy plates had sheered long, jagged gashes in the equally tough armor of the cruiser, Glayne saw, as he clambered from the emergency lock. A little air still sighed through the huge rent which the cruiser had smashed in the skin of the discoid. The gigantic landing dock was dwarfed by the three hundred meter bulk of the cruiser. Small Delban craft had been flung violently on either side and now littered the walls with their battered bodies. One or two of the Delban technicians had been caught by the crash and were either smeared thinly along the blastway or turned inside out as their bodies exploded from lack of air pressure.

Hurriedly Glayne flashed his torch about, trying to find the mono-car which his party had used to get to Selzi-Narfid's quarters. The car itself was gone but he found the gleaming mono-rail and followed it at a rapid trot. Fortunately the passage was well-equipped with automatic air-locks,

one of which had whipped in place when the air pressure dropped suddenly. When he came to the first of these, he found that the dilator was without power. He fumed at the wasted time as he burned around the lock with his torch and triggered the mechanism with his finger.

After he closed it behind him, Glayne picked up his jogging pace down the mono-rail passage. He felt a kind of grim, ruthless hatred when he thought of Bro-Doral. He hoped wistfully that he would find the sneering sadist before Garstow's energy beams ripped the discoid to pieces.

He wondered what had happened to Niala Chodred. During the battle he had consciously held his thoughts away from her and the dull ache of her memory. A chill loathing spread through him as he thought of the Vibra-Death. He knew of the agonies of that nerve torture; it produced not one slow death but thousands. More passionately than ever he longed to find the Bro.

Suddenly Glayne felt the floor of the discoid tremble under his feet. At first he ignored it, but it grew persistently stronger and he realized that the fleet was again hurling its energy beams at the discoid—but this time they were penetrating because there was no shield to stop them. He quickened his pace, rounded a long curve, and found that he had reached his goal.

He vaulted the high curbing and pounded down the tapestried corridor to the wide entrance stage. The dilator stud refused to operate, so Glayne burned into the lock to operate the stud. He discovered that the port itself was locked and a sudden unreasoning hope blazed up in him. With rapid movements he burned the lock out altogether and threw his weight against the door. With a wheeze it dilated and he staggered into the luxurious apartment, stumbling from the force of his own momentum.

He was scrambling to his feet when something hit him. It was soft with rounded contours—which he perceived even through the unsympathetic thickness of his spacesuit. And it had red hair and green eyes.

It was Niala.

"Glayne . . . oh, Glayne," she murmured clinging tightly to him.

"But . . . but you're not hurt," he stammered, his mind striving to adjust to the realization of a hope which it had long rejected.

"I thought they had killed you," she sobbed happily. "But you got away."

"Yes, he did," remarked a third voice, familiar and hated. "It was unfortunate."

Glayne whirled. Gort Bro-Doral stood inside the entrance stage, a black Cardy gun in his hand.

"Without you in the audience, Captain, I didn't see much point in amusing myself with the girl. But now that you have returned, Glayne—"

The big Guardian crouched to spring at the Delban, gathering his legs under him.

"I shouldn't do that, Captain," Bro-Doral observed sharply, waving the Cardy menacingly. "Life is too sweet to throw it away so rashly, isn't it? Besides, such refined methods require time and I fear your leader, Admiral Garstow, doesn't propose to give us that commodity."

It was true, Glayne realized. The energy beams of the assaulting fleets were smashing tremendous blow at the discoid so that it shuddered violently. The shocks increased in strength even as he turned his attention to them. Somewhere deep in Tjadlina air was escaping with a screaming whistle where the skin was ruptured.

"You seem to have no idea how hideous Death is, Glayne," said the Delban, approaching them slowly. "Out here on the periphery of the galaxy we like to make some sort of a ceremony of his coming—you see, he is always hovering around us." The Delban produced his explosive, nasal snicker. "Death is a fascinating subject; I have often wondered why you people in the Main Galaxy ignore him. Ever present, you know. And always waiting for you to step into his dark embrace."

Glayne watched Bro-Doral narrowly. He was but a couple of meters away. As the blows of the Kellander beams smashing into the discoid increased, he became more preoccupied with his subject and his grip on the Cardy grew lax. Glayne's hand tightened imperceptibly on the spare spacesuit.

"—out here on the Edge," Bro-Doral

was saying, "Life is considered only a prelude to Death. Personally—"

GLAYNE lunged, flinging the extra spacesuit to one side. Bro-Doral alerted instantaneously, but his Cardy wavered for a fraction of an instant toward the empty space suit. Before he could recover his mistake Glayne's flying body had struck him. The two went down together in a thrashing tangle. Glayne's movements were hampered by the bulky spacesuit and he felt his desperate grip on the Delban slipping. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bro-Doral extending his long fingers for the Cardy which he had dropped. Frantically he sought to restrain the Delban's long arm, missed, and saw the Delban slither from his grasp and reach for the gun.

Glayne scrambled to his feet just in time to see Niala snatch up the weapon a split second ahead of Bro-Doral. For a brief instant the Ruler of Ten Thousand Suns stared into the muzzle of Death. Then it wrapped him in its dark embrace forever as Niala fired.

Glayne retrieved the spacesuit and hurriedly helped her don it. The screaming whistle of escaping air formed a mad symphony with the rumbling crashes of corridors and whole levels caving in upon themselves. They raced from the apartment, through the tapestried corridor to the mono-rail which twisted like a live thing under the impact of the blasting energy beams. Jolt after jolt shook the discoid as torpedoes and mines exploded with devastating energy concussions deep within its entrails.

It was uphill all the way as the tremendous mass of the Tane Jewel dragged at their flagging steps. Niala fell a half a dozen times from the smashing shocks that shook the discoid. Glayne helped her to her feet, only to be thrown down himself the next instant by the concussion of an energy torpedo. Huge seams opened in the tough beralloy sides of the mono-rail passage as the mammoth support beams fractured.

Panting, they finally reached the point where the air-lock had fallen in place automatically. Glayne pushed at the port,

expecting it to dilate. It didn't move a fraction of a centimeter. A rapid examination showed that it was sprung. Feverishly he felt for his torch to cut it down.

But it was gone!

He suddenly felt sick, realizing that he had lost it in the struggle with Bro-Doral. Now he would never be able to find it again. They were trapped. Waves of defeat swept over him as he crouched in the darkness.

Suddenly he heard a new sound in the mad cacaphony of destruction that raged about them. It was the tortured scream of rending, snapping beralloy. And along with it came the sensation of increased weight.

The Tane Jewel!

The huge beams which had anchored it in place had evidently collapsed under the impact of the assault and now the Jewel was falling freely through space, crashing through everything that stood in its path. And it was falling toward them!

Glayne's weight grew unbearable as it approached. Vaguely he could make out its steady gold brilliance behind him in the passage. Grimly he clung to a projection in the wall with one arm and hung onto Niala with the other.

Then the miraculous happened.

The air-lock door which had been sprung now dilated under its own tremendous weight and the air pressure which remained in the passage flung Glayne and Niala through the lock.

Summoning the last reserves of his diminishing strength, Glayne put his arm around her body and half-supported her, half-dragged her up the few remaining steps of the mono-rail passage to the landing dock. Forty meters separated him from the emergency lock of the *Algol*. Thirty meters. His straining muscles groaned in anguish. Twenty meters. Niala was unconscious and her slight form was an unbearable weight to him as he dragged her with painfully slow steps. Ten . . . Five . . . he reached the lock.

He heaved her bodily into the lock and clambered in himself. Then through the inner door. Across to the elevator. His muscles were a symphony of agony. Slowly, slowly the elevator climbed. The

discoïd was splitting and breaking up around the *Algol*—or was it wedging the cruiser more firmly than ever in the vice grip of the beralloy outer portals? The elevator door quivered for a moment, then dilated in a series of little shudders. Ever so slowly Glayne crawled across the bridge deck, dragging the girl. A shock seat . . . a surette of verchromynal into the blue vein inside her elbow.

The crescendo of destruction reached new heights. The Tane Jewel was following him, splashing its insidious yellow radiance through the glassene window of the navigation bridge. It dogged his footsteps . . . closer . . . closer. The pilot's seat. The surette. Blackness encroached upon his vision. Dimly he was aware of his arm; it moved instinctively . . . slowly . . . slowly. The regular driver atomics began to shriek. His arm made another movement, flicking jet studs. Power suddenly sang in the forward jet chambers and ejected itself in a great, mushrooming flame. The *Algol* lurched backwards . . . another lurch . . . straining . . . a third. And the *Algol* was suddenly free.

The yawning pit of blackness closed its gaping maw on Glayne and he slid down, down, down . . .

IT OCCURRED to Glayne, when he woke up, that his quarters in the *Algol* had a changed appearance. He climbed from his acceleration hammock and bounded to the shower.

"Terran Standard!" he snorted to himself. "What the hell is Harbin doing puttering along like that?"

As he dried himself from the tingling shower he tried to put his finger on the change that had come over his quarters. For one thing, he couldn't find what he wanted. But an even worse defect was the absence of his dust.

Flag officers in the Stellar Guardians were generally conceded some slight idiosyncrasy through which they could assert their individuality in a service where indi-

viduality was otherwise rigorously suppressed. Glayne's own idiosyncrasy was dust. After five long years as a Dorleb training-cadet without a speck of dust to his name, Glayne felt he had earned his right to wallow in a bit of dust. But now it was all gone. His quarters were spotless.

He had finished dressing when a cautious knock sounded on his entrance portal; then it dilated before he could answer. Harbin's face appeared in the opening.

"Oh! I'm sorry, sir. Didn't think you were awake yet," Harbin said apologetically.

"Forget it," grunted Glayne. "Come in."

Harbin entered the room and fidgeted nervously for a moment. "Sir!" he finally burst out, "I . . . we're sorry about that unpleasantness. I want to apologize on behalf of—"

Glayne snorted and cut him off with a wave of his arm. "What I want to know," he said with deceptive calmness, "is, where the hell is my dust?"

Harbin grinned. "Lieutenant Chodred. I advised her against it—told her it was one of your peculiarities. But she wouldn't listen."

"What 'she' is this?" inquired a new voice, pleasantly husky.

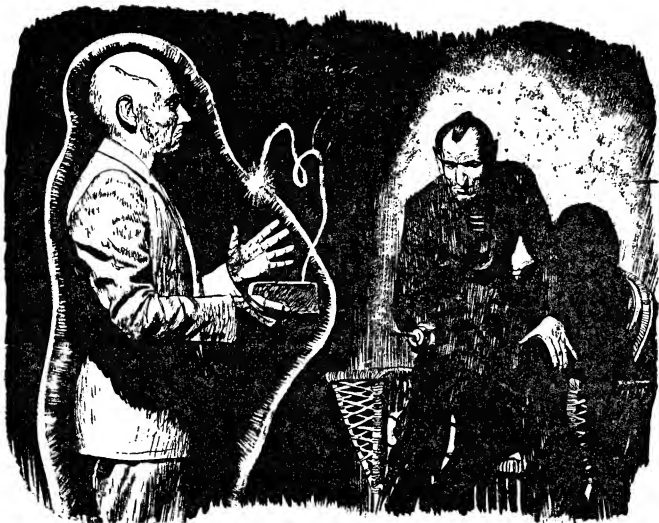
Glayne turned and saw Niala leaning in the entrance stage. "You know damned well whom we are talking about," he said ominously. "Why did you take away my dust?"

"Oh, is that all?" she laughed. It was a deliciously cool and tinkling laugh. Harbin foresaw an imminent explosion. Being a discreet warrior who longs to fight another day, he fled from the room.

But it never quite jelled. Glayne extended his arms to the laughing, green-eyed Niala. But she stood her ground.

"No," she teased. "Not when you have a beard like that."

Glayne swore and reached for his depilatory. He was going to set a new galactic speed record for shaving.



From the black box swelled a pulsing bubble of iridescent light.

ULTIMATUM

By **ROGER DEE**

In a dingy little Indiana hotel room the fate of three worlds suddenly hung in precarious balance!

WINANT FOLLOWED THE lanky sheriff down the jail corridor past rows of empty, plank-walled cells and drew a sharp breath of relief when they found the last cubicle still tenanted.

"That's Uncle Ivor, all right," Winant said. "Sorry he caused you so much trouble, sheriff, but I'll be glad to pay his fine. What's the charge against him?"

The sheriff rubbed a palm across his drooping mustaches and looked doubtfully at the old man who sat on the edge of the cell bunk, the bald dome of his head cradled dejectedly in his hands.

"You couldn't rightly say there *is* a charge, mister," he admitted. "Your uncle popped

into Ben Stuart's Drop Inn restaurant night before last with a little black box under his arm, naked as a jaybird and talking like a crazy man.

"I'm a visitor from Mars," he says. "Take me to your president, and quick!" Ben thought he was crazy, or drunk, and ran him out with a meat cleaver, and the old duck went down to the Warner Hotel and pulled the same goofy act. Pop Warner called me, and I went down and threw the old coot into the cooler. I knew right off that he was cracked, because I even had to show him how to put on the clothes I brought him. And the wingding he pitched when I took that black box away from him—wow!"

Winant shook his head. "Poor Uncle Ivor," he said commiseratingly. "The last time he got away from us he thought he was Mahatma Ghandi, and tried to buy a bus ticket from Cincinnati to New Delhi, India. I found him, finally, in Evansville, Indiana. It's amazing how he got this far south, but then a mentally-unbalanced person can do surprising things, sometimes."

The sheriff snorted. "Unbalanced, hell," he said. "The old coot's crazy as a bed-bug. Just got in from Mars, he says, and he wants the president of the United States—on the double!"

He unlocked the door and Winant went inside.

"It's all right now, Uncle Ivor," he said gently. The old man raised a wrinkled, leathery face and stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Let's go over to my hotel and get a good meal and a hot bath," Winant urged. "Then we'll go home again. Ready, now?"

A few minutes later in the jail office the sheriff pocketed the bill Winant gave him and handed over a small lacquered metal box that was surprisingly heavy for its size.

"Here's your uncle's radio," he said. "New-fangled model, I reckon. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, so I just left it alone."

Winant lifted the hinged cover and looked inside the box at the neat array of tiny meters and knobs that covered the control panel.

"A wise decision, sheriff," he said dryly. "Wiser, perhaps, than you'll ever know."

THE old man stood in the center of Winant's hotel room, the sheriff's ill-fitting denims hanging on his slight frame like the castoff clothing of a scarecrow.

"The box," he said. His voice, after talking for so long, was a hoarse, rasping croak. "Give me the box."

Winant sat in a decrepit wicker chair, holding the box in his lap, his eyes missing no detail of the old man's shrunken figure with its bald dome-like head and wrinkled parchment face.

"I'll give you the box when you tell me something that makes sense," he said.

A SPLIT SECOND IN ETERNITY



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(AMORC)

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

"What you've just told me is nothing but a rehash of the story you told the sheriff—that your name is Yardana and that you are an envoy from Mars, sent to Earth to help scientific authorities develop safe atomic power. Look—I'm a news writer, down here to investigate the rumors of a blue meteorite landing in the hills just north of here and to check up on the comic accounts I read of your appearance. I went to a lot of trouble and some risk to get you out of jail, and I want a reasonable story for my trouble. What about it, now?"

The old man wrung his hands. "Give me the box. Give me the box!"

"Later," Winant promised. "When you give me the real story behind this thing I'll not only give you back your box, I'll give you a lift out of this burg as well."

He looked at the old man sharply. "How could a Martian speak the kind of English you've been using? Why should a Martian look so much like an ordinary human being? It doesn't add up."

"We are of the same root stock," Yardana said. "Intelligent life follows the same evolutionary pattern, no matter where it develops, so long as conditions are the same. As for the language, my people have followed your experiments with electromagnetics since their beginning. We know every language of Earth intimately, through long study of your radio programs."

Winant laughed. "Maybe the sheriff was right, at that," he said. "It's a goofy story, too fantastic for belief."

He shrugged and handed the old man the black box.

"Here's your toy," he said resignedly. "I guess that's all I'm going to get for my trouble; just enough misinformation for another tongue-in-cheek article for Sunday supplements."

He picked up his brief-case from the floor and laid it on the corner of the writing table at his elbow. "The lift I promised you still goes, if you want it, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow."

The old man took the black box eagerly and threw back the cover. His fingers flickered over the controls with practised familiarity.

"I shall not need your assistance—now," he said. His pale eyes met Winant's triumphantly. "Now that I have the Bubble again I have a means of return to my ship better than any Earthly conveyance could offer. Watch!"

FROM the black box swelled a pulsing radiance, a misty rose-tinted sphere that grew swiftly until it enveloped Yardana in a six-foot bubble of iridescent light. Through its wavering envelope the old man's face showed taut and purposeful, its pleading replaced by grim determination.

"Print your story," he said. "Tell your people about Yardana and his mission. Tell them too that their days are numbered from this minute, for in their savage perversion of natural principles to warlike uses they have forged a menace that threatens the peace of the Solar System and, eventually, of the universe itself."

He moved toward the window, the rosy Bubble glowing about him. Winant turned his chair slightly, watching, but he did not rise.

"My people knew the secrets of the atom," Yardana said, "before your own learned the use of fire. We built great cities and telescopes when your ancestors were troglodytes, living in caves and eating uncooked meat. We expected no dangerous intelligence to arise on your planet for thousands of years as yet, and we paid little attention to your progress until recently, when we learned through your radio broadcasts that you had cracked the atom. We knew then that something was dangerously wrong, and that we must investigate quickly before your sudden wisdom put you upon equal footing with us."

"Today, when you should be only learning to compound gunpowder, we find you applying electromagnetic principles which you cannot possibly understand, and harnessing the atom for the sole purpose of killing greater numbers of your fellow beings. I came here, not to aid your scientists in developing the rudiments of the atomic power they have discovered, but to find the reason behind the sudden freakish intelligence they are displaying. I have discovered that reason—the scientific and political pow-

ers of Earth are under the domination and guidance of alien intelligences, entities bent upon developing a race of Earthmen so warlike and so technically proficient in the waging of war that it must endanger our own Martian culture."

Winant sat unmoving, his eyes not leaving the Martian's wrinkled face. The Bubble hissed audibly, its tiny sissuration suddenly loud in the room.

"Therefore I shall recommend in my report that the human race be completely destroyed," Yardana said. "Alone it could not offer a serious threat against us for ages, but led and instructed by these outside intelligences it must soon surpass our own scientific development. And we must destroy you before you learn the secret of space travel, or we shall be too late to save ourselves.

"We fought with the peoples of Venus once in ages past for the same reason, and reduced them to inconsequence if not to extinction, for no sign of intelligent life has been detected upon their world since we blasted it three thousand years ago. When I have made my report the council of Elders will recommend the blasting of Earth, and the solar system will be safe again for our superior Martian civilization—this time forever."

"When you have made your report," Winant said. His smile was edged with a sudden secret amusement. "But suppose these 'alien entities' prevent your return?"

He opened the brief-case on the table and put a hand inside it. The Martian laughed harshly.

"No missile can penetrate a Bubble, you fool," he said contemptuously. "It is impervious to any Earthly weapon."

Winant laughed in turn, his lips pressed back flat against his teeth. The repressed hatred of three thousand years spoke in his voice, added pressure to the thrust of his thumb on the stud of the little silver tube in his hand.

"Of course it is," he said, as the sullen crimson ray from the tube disintegrated Martian, box and Bubble alike in a breath. "That's why I came prepared—with a Venusian weapon!"



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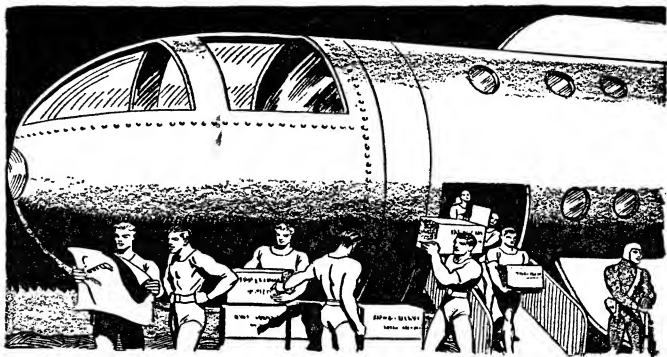
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THE VIZIGRAPH

IT seems to us that there is no room for an editor's opinions in a department of this kind. It is a readers' section—and the editor can drop dead.

But a definition of science fiction seems rather harmless, after all; it isn't as if one were taking sides in a race controversy (but oh, how we wanted to!) or debating the amount of sex we should allow to creep in—or out.

Furthermore, we did say last time that we had a definition, and so we are now on a spot, with all the theories coming from you fans; besides, it's a bit unfair to appear to sneer at your efforts, when we keep our own to ourselves, safe and untouchable.

So, if you'll pardon this pre-emption of your time and space, we'll drag into the light of day our own puny, crawling idea of what constitutes STF.

Because science fiction has up to now been printed almost exclusively on pulp paper and distributed largely to pulp paper readers, it has been classified ("dismissed" might be a better term) as "escape literature", meaning as we all know literature intended and designed to transport the reader away from his environment and/or problems.

But wasn't there already available, when STF began, an abundance of romantic and escapist literature—the western, the international spy, the general adventure, the light romance? Was there any real need for a new field, offering the glory of science and a peek at the world of tomorrow?

We will oversimplify to save space. We will declare fantasy fiction to be no concern of the true science fiction fan. We will not go into certain factors which are the concern of anthropologists and psychologists. We will herewith, and humbly, serve up our definition of science fiction.

It is easily enough defined technically. STF is any story whose plot depends, in whole or in part, on an imaginary scientific discovery, which in turn is based on a *known* scientific discovery.

But we all knew that. When we ask for a definition of science fiction, aren't we really look-

ing for the reason it came into being, what makes the STF fan tick?

We call it the utopia-wish. We say there is a large proportion of readers who are as beset by problems and resentful of current economic conditions as the escapists. But this particular group simply finds it more, much more enchanting to dream about tomorrow. A tomorrow in which science has made the world a better place to live in.

And there you have it—our real definition of science fiction:

It is an Opportunity—to Dream about Tomorrow.

Lewis Sherlock, thou hast been annointed; name thy choice. Roger Dard, they love you for second; pick two (but get only one, Rog!). Wilkie Conner, pick three.

YOUR EDITOR.

FROM ONE WHO OUGHT TO KNOW

1313 Abandon Lane
Eternal, Hell

DEAR MR. PAYNE:

Perhaps I should have begun with "Dear Lewis Sherlock", for the purpose of this letter, actually, is to give the poor fellow some encouragement. He is, you will recall, the gentleman who wrote the fine epistle in your Winter Issue scolding that idiot, Al Einstein, for claiming a belief in a "Supreme Being". Such nonsense!

Being a bright lad, and boasting of his interest in "heavy science and math", Lewis had, no doubt, read the works of Abbé Lemaitre, who proposed that the universe originated with the explosion of an immense primordial atom.

Where did this atom come from? Why, it condensed from energy, of course.

But where did the energy come from? What caused it to change form and become matter? What caused this atom of matter to explode? Why, uh . . . you see, uh . . . Well, no matter about such small details. After all, old Abbé was

The *Dead-Star Rover* is so exceptionally fine that I want to do a bit of exulting over it. The gimmick of this story—having men separated into "races" by reason of the mechanical means of

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their transportation and livelihood—is absolutely new to me. Robert Abernathy's ability to make the reader feel with the terrapin that the machine is merely an extension of his own personality shows a writing ability quite out of the ordinary. It even shows me what a different person I should probably be if I were robbed of my pressure cookers and my washing machine. It points up the growing lack of concern of the automobile driver for that member of the inferior race of pedestrians. Even the solution of the story for the two poor "machineless humans", which seems at first to have been handed them on a platter, could not have come about if they had not truly been human and made an adjustment to humanity before the solution was offered them. And those two humans are such real people. Congratulations on a triple-A-1 story.

BETSY CURTIS

SLOSH AWAY, VIZIFANS!

Box 13
Ralston, Washington

DEAR EDITOR:

Had it not been that the Winter Issue arrived through the mail today, I should have dogmatically maintained that it was still summer. My attendant has evidently weather-stripped my jacket (the one with the sleeves that tie around my back) for I have not suffered the least from cold. But, taking only a moment to forgive my Esquire girl her error, I turn my mind to more cosmic matters.

First of all, it has been evident for a number of years that all the contributors to the Vizigraph are grossly uninformed on an unbelievable number of subjects. Previous to this time, I have been content to allow those unfortunates to slosh about in their individual cesspools of ignorance, but now I feel called upon to halt an uncommonly hideous bit of distorted fiction that is being spread by the horde.

The Vizigrapher who is especially responsible for the spread of this ugly contamination is W. Paul Ganley, and his criminal misdeed concerns the revolting rumor which he is attempting to defile fandom with. If that vile creature has infected your pure, impressionable mind with the slightest doubt, then renew your righteous faith with what I have to say. Mr. Editor, there are *not* any "other" science-fiction publications! And until that glorious house of fiction, Fiction House, begins another, there will *never* be any "other" science-fiction publications! There are magazines that try to imitate, to be sure, but their very names prevent them from being called "science-fiction publications." Ask Vizigrapher Ganley to name a present day, professional publication that boasts of a solid, green-blooded, truly science-fictionish name as does PLANET STORIES. He will be unable to meet such a request, I am sure.

From the above facts, one instantly realizes that your personal request for a definition of science-fiction is needless. Any person of superior intelligence, such as I, can tell you that science-fiction is anything that is printed in PLANET STORIES. Yes, when they are printed in PLANET STORIES, even the advertisements are science-fiction!

Now that all opposition has been thoroughly crushed, the focus of my attention shall turn to another important matter—picking the three best (least bad, that is) letters printed in the Vizigraph.

This is hardly an easy task because your Vizigraphers seem to adhere to a set standard of stupidity—it must be an effort, at times, for them to keep themselves down to that standard—but I have decided on my choices, and I suggest that you grant originals to the three I list, despite the votes of the mentally unfortunate individuals who blunderingly attempt these delicate decisions for themselves. Grant first choice to Mr. Ganley for being the main reason that you are blessed with this letter; allow second choice to Margaret Gardiner because of her intelligent awareness of the types of mentalities that purchase PLANET STORIES; give third choice to Wilkie Conner as a bribe to rid PLANET STORIES of his ghastly attempts at verse.

I make no effort to comment on the stories since I am able to write so very much better than any of your authors, and it would no doubt cause many suicides among their ranks were I to expend a volume or two in pointing out a few of their more obvious errors.

Modestly yours,

WALLY WEBER

DEAD-STAR NELSON

433 E. Chapin St.
Cadillac, Mich.

DEAR PAUL,

No more pix for Nelson, hey?

It is dawn, grey-yellow dawn.

They come. Now little peaks on the horizon, now strange beetles crawling in the distance, now behemoths of towering steel—great masses of welded grey that shake the ground with their coming.

Vast beyond imagination, obscuring all the eastern sky with their bulk, they come. On broad metal treads they rumble toward us, closer, closer.

Now their shadows fall on us and it is black dark and we scream with terror. They rise like walls above us as high as the clouds.

The very earth creaks with their weight. The grinding of their gears deafens us. The wide, flat plates of their treads descend down on us, quickly, heedlessly.

Crunch.

Yerz,

RADELL FARADAY NELSON, BeM

AWARDS US WITH PIC

119 Ward Road
North Tonawanda, N. Y.

DEAR PLP:

I bought PS. I laid down a grimy quarter, receiving a nickle in change. (Hey, there'd be TROUBLE 'round here if I didn't get that change!) Then, shielding it carefully (I'm used to it by now, but other people . . .); as I was saying, I strolled home casually.

Puffing from the unaccustomed running, I donned my special, inch-thick, smoked glasses, and commenced to search for LA VIZI. I found it. I read it through.

Removing the shattered spectacles from a cut countenance, I put on another. Then I repeated the performance a third time.

What all this has been leading up to . . . The best letter was mine. MINE! Why, you ask?

Why, indeed, I replied. So I put on my fourth pair of lenses, and carefully scrutinized those hallowed pages.

And I found the answer!

My letter was odious, but your comments were supernal. In just the right places. It was therefore the funniest epistle of the bunch. And therefore—PLP pick one, Connor pick two, —uh, lessee—Curtis pick three. Whassat? L. R. might not give you a pic? Well, if they don't—then Connor pick one, Curtis pick two,—uh, h-mm-mmm, this gets complicated, not many letters this ish, none from Oliver, et al, well—Cox, pick three.

Whew! Poetry in LA VIZI! Well, it's fairly good, anyway. But keep it down. Look at what happened to — er — (ahem).

THE NIGHT HAS A THOUSAND EYES
... This story has a thousand merits. Bradbury didn't write it, but he might have! This was so good that I can't find words enough to describe it. (Yeah, yeah, I know, "purchase a Webster's Unabridged," but too many comments is too much!)

THE GREEN DREAM. Excellent. Wonderful. LET THE ANTS TRY. Well, the ants can try or fry, but the story tried, and made the grade.

THE DEAD-STAR ROVER. An excellent lead novelette, but no lead novel.

SWORD OF FIRE. Oke.

The other two were below average. (Something had to be, didn't it?)

A few gripes, a few groans... "Jupiter Jones" happens to be a rather well-known and well-liked detective-fiction character, who has starred in such novels as "Harvard Has a Homicide", "This is Murder, Mr. Jones", "Three-Thirds of a Ghost", and a couple of others. Tsk-tsk.

MacCreigh's novel—pardon me, short-story—was fantasy, not STF, because it is inconceivable, impossible, and a few other l'il adjectives. (Who needs a Webster's Unabridged?) Has anyone ever stopped to consider what numerous otherwise-unrelated mutations would have to take place to form such a species as MacCreigh proposes? Such as—feeding tract, lungs, throat, breathing apparatus, new system of blood vessels, new type of blood, and a couple other obscure items like that.

Yes, to return to LA VIZI, that was fantasy. Had the author explained HOW such a thing could have taken place twice (once for the queen, once for the drone—or are those bees?—or whatever they call the male. And just how many potential queens are given birth to by an ant-queen?)

STF, then, is "Explained Fantasy". I believe this is about as short an explanation as one can put forth—but why put one forth at all? This entire thing was given a thorough going-over in, lemme see, in—I think. (How long have you been apoplectic, now, PLP?)

One thing—will someone explain "fantasy"?

So Bradbury, the fair-haired boy of STF, returns. Ha. Bradbury rides again! Has he been gone? Gad, authors have been known to leave a mag for two or three issues, y'know.

One thing about your comment appended to the end of my epistle, ed—we fen with pica type-writers are at a distinct disadvantage—we write three and four-page letters, and those with elite machines write two-pagers and say as much! Bah. (Pooh!—Ed.)

About La Brackett—do we refer to her as



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One thing more, ere I depart to limbo for another three months. (Well, school; it's the same thing.) This business about * * *. It's amusing, and all that, but is Love Romances so backward that their publications aren't allowed to mention the names of other publications? (Yes.—Ed.)

Fiendishly,

W. PAUL GANLEY

P. S.: I wanna ask something—I mean, just in case—Is that pic of Bradbury on 110 available as an original . . . ? (No.—Ed.)

NO STF IN PS? TST!

418 High St.
Closter, N. J.

DEAR PLP:

The answer is absurdly simple; science-fiction is what PLANET STORIES prints everything else but.

It was a warm day in August when the Winter Issue of PS arrived in the fair city of Closter, but I didn't question the seasonal oddity, for I realized that the publisher likes to send your mag to the stands via time-machine. The radioactive rays of the lectro-time spatial warp mess up the cover a bit, but we must bear with these things.

The stories were all good this trip. While both novels were very good and neither plot outstanding, oldtimer McDowell's touch was far more entertaining than that of the relatively new author.

Seems to me I've heard that title of the de Courcy yarn somewhere before. Hmm. Maybe I heard someone sing it; or was it a movie? I dunno. (From a poem titled "Flight", by Frances W. Bourdillon, 1852-1921.—Ed.)

"Flight From Time", by Coppel was very good, except for one thing. I don't believe it.

Evidently you wanted to start another fight in La Vizi. In the letter of Lewis Sherlock you found the grenade to start it off. I admit you could debate for years on such a proposition as a definition of STF, but, when you choose that as your grenade, you ignored the atom bomb planted in the last three or four paragraphs—namely, his views on religion.

In a brief sentence he stated that it would be a better, more progressive world, if we had less religion. Also he wonders how the top notch brain boys of science can profess religion.

If that doesn't start a bigger fight than "what is STF?", I'm an uncle's monkey.

Before I reveal to you the awesome, enlightening truth of the matter (my opinion) let me order you to give Mister Sherlock undisputed first place. Please?

2nd to Mitchell Badler (for that very wonderful first paragraph). Third to A. A. Gilliland.

And now . . . (the sound of bugles) . . . MY opinion!!!

It has been shown in the past that religion can hinder progress. Witness Greece, Rome, and the early days of Christianity. I feel, though, that it was due to the fact that religion was too closely linked with government. Any peoples that firmly

believe that their religious priests can tell them and the government how to live, think, and breathe, will not progress.

I do believe that modern religion is the solution Under a democratic religion, this ol' world has made unbelievable progress both in science and sociology, all in a comparatively short period of time.

If, however, less religion does tend toward progress, then Russia undoubtedly will become the greatest country in the world. And I do not believe that.

How a scientist can also be religious has me stumped. Maybe someone else has some views on that matter.

Becoming serious again, I must say that that thrilling picture of Ray Bradbury shining like a beacon on page 110, thrilled me no end. Look at him, his beautiful face like some dashing movie star, sneering disdainfully down at all the masses of his admirers (or maybe he has a stomach ache). Sigh. Oh, girls, isn't he wonderful!

Ya shouldn't of done it, Payne. Ya started something. I can just see the letters Ray is going to start receiving from awestruck female fans. You have now put dear Ray in a dangerous position . . . (bending over?).

"Dear Ray: I love you passionately. If you do not marry me, I shall leap to my death from the roof of Matt's Meat Market . . ." "Dear Ray: If you do not send me \$457.87 by Feb. 23 I shall name you as the father of my baby."

See? Besides, that last girl can't claim that. Ray Bradbury is the father of MY baby!

I remain,

Very truly mine,
DAVID M. CAMPBELL

THREE STEPS TO THE STARS

2711 LaSalle Street
Racine, Wisconsin

DEAR EDITOR:

CONGRATULATIONS! I'll say it again—CONGRATULATIONS! (Heard you the first time.—Ed.)

"What fer?" says our ed (innocently keeping a modest smile on his purdy puss, but meanwhilst knowing all the time what fer).

Why, congratulations for making the Winter Issue of PLANET STORIES one of the best issues I have ever read—and I've got all but four of 'em. The one blemish on your otherwise pure mag was that you did not print my letter. The Galactic Co-ordinator shall hear of this! Winter '49 of P.S. came as a very agreeable surprise after the fall magazine which I consider about the lousiest you've done thus far in your illustrious career, altho the lousiness was for the most part due to Brackett's *Enchantress of Venus*, which nauseated me no end. To paraphrase a certain book that Lewis Sherlock (I'll get to him later) would not want mentioned here: "Yea, verily I say unto you, it stinketh!"

The outstanding story of an outstanding issue was *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* by John and Dorothy de Courcy. I rank this story well up among such classics as Bradbury's *Million Year Picnic*, and my favorite, the old epic, *When Worlds Collide*. Hereafter when anyone tries to tell me that stories about space pirates are hack, I'll just push in their face with the Winter of PLANET containing TNHATE and tell 'em to go

to blazes! Where I shall now change the subject ere my missive becomes too lengthy.

My, my, so Lewis Sherlock (I won't pun! I won't! I won't!) doesn't like Gushy Cowboy Stories being stuck on Mars and called STF. Well now, Whoa! Sherlock. Let's stop a moment and use a wee bit of perspective—as your namesake might have done. As my bearded English Prof (bless his icy heart) once painfully pointed out to me, there are only three (count 'em—3) basic plots, to wit and viz: (oh how I love that phrase, to wit and viz: to wit and viz.—Uggle!) 1. boy-meets-girl, 2. success and reverse-success story, and 3. the man-who-learned better. Most stories, of course, are combinations of these basic plots, and you'll notice that none of them have anything to do with environment. Obviously then, an author can have his plot enacted in ancient Greece or the Great Galaxy in Andromeda. In fact, you could probably lift the plot from any story and, with only minor changes, place it in completely different surroundings and still have a very passable story.

To justify my point a little more, I'll just take Sherlock's suggestion and define STFiction. Science-Fiction is the author's particular mixture of the three basic plots placed in an environment of what he considers to be a logical extension of the future. This extension naturally must conform to accepted natural laws or, if it does not, it must replace the discarded law with a new one which does not contradict facts covered by the old one.

In the future of space travel there will logically be three phases:

1. The first phase will be an exploratory period. The cost of transportation being so high, the first explorers and colonists will be highly-trained and integrated scientists sent by national governments and large companies.

2. Then some scientists will stumble across a cheap propulsive that will lift interplanetary travel up to about the same status as railroads held 100 years ago. This will be the age of high romance; of fast-shooting rocketmen and lusty women; of space pirates and interplanetary warfare. Since this phase is as inevitable (unless something drastic occurs) as the pioneering days of our country were, don't you think the so-called "thud and blunder" stories have as much right in STF as any other type? If you say, "Throw out stories of space piracy!" then I say, "Throw out science-fiction!" for these tales are the blood of STF. Science-fiction was born in it and without it, will eventually degenerate into a dry, lifeless travesty. I say, "Hurrah for PLANET!" for upholding a losing but worthwhile cause when it prints so-called "cowboy-science-fiction". Of course, many such stories (not in PLANET) are tripe, but the de Courcys have shown what a good yarn can be made from a logical extension. Naturally there will be important differences between the settling of the solar system and that of the West, but in general the effect will be similar.

3. The last phase will be full colonization. Humanity will be still for a while. Then some damnfool will come out with an interstellar drive, and we're off again—with variations, but the same general outline.

Well, Paul, that's my contribution to PLANET's hysteria for this issue. Pies to Lizzy Curtis, Clarence Jacobs, and one to Paul Ganley for his well-worded post-script.

BRUCE HAPKE



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BACK INTO THE WOODWORK

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DEAR PLANET'S LINT-HEADED PTERODACTYL:

My letters are getting fewer and fewer as time goes on, so you'd better print this lest I never write another. Just think, it might make the Spring 1st of dear ol' PLANET a shrine to me.

Glad to see the Vizi is still plugging. I recommend that somebody start a society for the prevention of guys like Hall. I was so mad when I read that letter of his that I wrote a long bubbling, beautifully hateful thing to you suggesting a thousand different ways to do away with guys like him, but after I cooled down a little I decided not to send it, thinking lots of other guys felt the same way and would send theirs. Then I wrote you a card telling you to keep La Viz and not to pay any attention to those dopes, and I forgot to mail it, I think.

The best letter (for 1st choice) was Ed Cox's. His opinions were nearly the same as mine, and what a character. Why can't I be funny like that? I'm just stupid. I'll never get a illo . . . Bawww.

Conner came next. Give him two cracks. In only one point do I disagree with him and that one is his remark about Hamilton. Brackett in her way, and that way being style, is better than Hamilton, but there will never be another to come up to Hamilton's shoulders in plotting ability.

Let Lew Sherlock have third for his sound discussion. I wish I could write a letter like that once in a while too. I'm just stupid. I'll never get an illo—Oh, pardon me, I said that once.

Now to the yarns . . .

I opened the book to the title page, and there, looming up at me, outshining everything else, was that one fiery sentence. "McDowell Returns with another Flaming Out-World Novel!" Well, every word of the sentence was truth, but wasn't it a trifle melodramatic? Oh well, who cares? *Sword of Fire* was, I believe, the year's second most outstanding novel, Brackett's *Enchantress of Venus* of the issue before this one being the first most outstanding. McDowell can write. Man, how he can write! *Swords of Fire* was by far the first this issue. I hope you pay him for his work as he deserves to be paid. For cold-action style, he is tops.

The Dead-Star Rover seemed to be a nicely-handled novel, too, and it was different, way different from your usual stuff. It was second and would have been first except for McDowell's neat style. Abernathy is good. His names are very exclusive. Torcerd, Vascled, etc.

I recognized one name, speaking of names in your stories, that Brackett used in a swell long novel in another mag (a novel, by the way, which I felt should have been in PLANET). The name, Rhiannon. He was a god in Brackett's yarn. *Tubemonkey* was good, too. Nice, cold-action styling there too, I thought. It was third.

The story behind *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* was good, but the title, and a copied title at that, was corny in this situation. It lined up for fourth place.

Bryce Walton is always good. *The Green Dream* did not disappoint me.

Jimmie MacCreigh was up to par too. The best thing I ever read by MacCreigh was *Donovan Had a Dream*. Morbid and beautiful, that was. *Flight From Time*, I'm sorry to say, did

not agree with my nervous system. I did not enjoy it as well as the others, but it was readable. The whole darned book was readable, but lacking of red-eyed Ray Bradbury, sadly enough.

Oh yes, that reminds me, I saw that picture of him you ran in La Vizi. It came off pretty good. I'll send you mine and you can put it in, that'll send 'em. (Where? Well, that remains to be seen, but I'll send 'em.) Why don't you print more pics of your writers? I'd like to know what McDowell and Walton look like, and a few more (*We'll print 'em if they'll send 'em—Ed.*)

The cover was, it was, . . . why, I, it was . . . yes, wasn't it though. Who'd you use for a hero-model, Johnny Weismuller? And what's a idea of that beat-up old meat-axe he's swinging?

Put away the gun, Anderson, it was okay. But I wish that they'd leave out that stupid block sign of lettering. It would be much nicer without it.

The McWilliams drawings were all fine, but I have a question. What does he use to draw them with? Chalk? They're all so cut-and-dried perfect. You only featured one artist in the last three or four years whom I have liked better than Mac, and that was Rubimor. He did the best inside illos of any artist I have come in contact with. I even like his work, as far as facial expression and proportion go, better than Finlay. (Why don't you use Finley?)

Well, I said my piece, now I shall crawl back into the woodwork until once more PS graces the newsstand and I will come out and ungrace it with 21 cents.

Stupidly,

MARVIN WILLIAMS

(Finlay, we feel, lends himself far better to fantasy than science fiction. We have always admired his work.—Ed.)

A MODEL READER

2615 West Cary Street
Richmond 20, Virginia

DEAR EDITOR:

I've never made a habit of writing STF mags before and I hope it won't continue. I barely have enough time to read all of 'em that are on the market now. And in fact that is the only complaint I have or will have if any new ones crop up. That is, if the number of mags on the market increases I just won't have time enough to read them, and I know it'll just kill me. Just think, not being able to read all of them.

I love all of your stories, your authors, the editors and publishers and the printers even. I have no complaints, no criticisms, no suggestions. Your magazine is perfect as far as set-up, etc. is concerned. If you want to cut out the letters that is okay, and if you want to increase the number of letters that is okay with me too. If all your authors want to put sex in their stories that's okay, and if they want to leave it out, well, I'm not going to kick. The only time I'm going to kick is the time I go to my dealer and he tells me he's just sold the last copy of your mag. Interesting thought. Eh!

Good thing I thought of that, so I think I'll enclose my personal check for eighty cents, and have you send it to me. That way I just can't miss your mag. can I?

Very truly yours,

GARLAND M. ROBERTS

ANOTHER VICTIM OF THE TIME WARP

Hotel Flanders
135 West 47th Street
New York 19, N. Y.

DEAR PAIM:

As things do stand (and they do stand vertically), I have been an admirer (?) and reader of PLANET ever since I bought my first copy two years ago at the age of 10. But at that time, being a shy and timorous young fool, I didn't have courage enough to address a letter to the revered —ugh—and august La Vizi. But times have changed and I am now a little older perhaps, but also a little wiser at 14. (*We make you out to be twelve years old, but maybe we can't add.*—Ed.)

After having stealthily crept up and having filched a copy of PLANET from the blind man's newsstand, the first thing I turn to peruse with bloodshot orbs is (natch!) La mon amis Vizi! To have discontinued the latter item from PLANET's mystical pages, as was so brazenly proposed in the Summer ish of P. S., would have been akin to the action of gouging a man's eyes out; and since La Vizi is the eyes of our sagacious and entertaining zine, let me offer my three arms in an amorous embrace now that you have thought of continuing LV.

The stories in the Winter Ish were above par; even thoughtfulness was shown in their storytelling capacity. Of course, there were too many of the usual blurbs in two or three tales but with the *Dead Star Rover* and *Sword of Fire*, which are incidentally tied for first place, what else can one ask!!—*Let the Ants Try* is undoubtedly one of the best stories PLANET has had in a long while, and that includes novel-length as well as short stories. MORE end-of-the-world and mad-doctor stories PLEASE, with a sprinkling of the time-machine element now and then. *Tubemonkey* and *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (aye-yi-ey!) tie together as the poorest tales. All that was missing from the latter tale was Edward G. Robinson. Maybe it would've been better if Robinson was included in PLANET's version of "1000 Eyes."

The Green Dream takes place with the above two tales and lives up to its title, no doubt being written by a green author; also very reminiscent of a detective story I read the other week about a murderer in the Louisiana bayous who plans the murder of his brother, except that this took place on Venus. Shucks! I could write better than that with three of my eyes shut; as a matter of fact I might write a "good" story just for reprisal.

Flight From Time would have been one of the "A-1" stories in this ish if it were not for the dubious and unsatisfactory ending. If Malenson's escape from justice was supposed to last for 15 years, even though in reality it was only a 22 month stellar cruise, and though his metabolism increased to unusual proportions, how can it be explained that he ate up his 15 years' stock of food in only 22 months? Supposing that his speeded up metabolism may have been the primary factor for his over-indulgence, I cannot credulously conceive how one person could devour in 22 months only a supply of food meant to stretch over a period of 15 years, without dying from acute gastritis, heart failure or other internal symptoms before he reached the Earth!!! — Someone please explain ere I turn to gluttony from being

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frustrated. (We forgot to say that when Coppel came out of his closet he was turrible hungry.—Ed.)

AHA & EUREKA!!! I see that the Ray of Bradbury will appear once again within the neglected sanctum sanctorum of PLANET. Strange how you neglect the better authors and writers of such parsimonious stories and letters as me. Now take me for example; I have with me a novel of super-duper science and space-ships of 100,000 words and if you'll only look at it—

Hasta La Vizi for the nonce,

CALVIN THOMAS BECK

DREADS CLOSETS

4 Spring Street
Lubec, Maine

DEAR PAUL:

I get back from the Convention and what do I find waiting for me? Well, uh, among other things, PLANET STORIES! So I read it.

Abernathy seems to be getting good now. His first coupla three PStories weren't so hot, but his "come-back" stories are much better. The mechanized "fauna" of the future is a new one to me. Pretty good, too. But even better was *Sword of Fire*. Nice to see this guy back again. Both "novels" were titled oddly (not fitting to the story; or else, please explain how they link up?).

Tops in the shorts were *Let the Ants Try* and *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes*. Very good. Anthology material, if you ask me (and so what if ya didn't?). The others were worth their space (he callously writes, not caring how the authors wince as they read the careless words . . .).

But speaking of pen-names (a pet subject of mine, heheh) . . . If you included this issue in your " . . . past year . . ." (*We didn't*—Ed.), there was at least one in this issue you don't know about. But, with it being possible that it is supposed to be secret or sumpin', I won't mention it.

Liked the pics, as usual, this time. Especially McWilliams'. Saw some originals by him during the auctions at the convention, but being too poor to bid on them, I don't snag them, darn it!

Hmm, guess No. 1 ought to go to W. Paul Ganley, he tries so hard and long. Dard gets 2nd and Sherlock (of Sherlock's Super Spaceships, Inc.) gets third. I notice a gal from Maine has written in! At last, a fellow (oops, femme) Maine-iac. But why hasn't she written me? Mebbe she's read my letters . . .

Not being an unkind beast at heart, PLP, I'll spare you and NOT write that four-page letter covering PS for 1949. But I will say that 1949 was a good year, all in all. Brackett came back, for one thing. The letter-section stood the acid test. And you printed a letter of mine in all four issues! Gad, thanks!

The Bradbury story for next issue sounds good. About Thomas Wolfe and titled *Forever and The Stars* . . .? What connection?

Suggestions: Where is Henry Hasse? Also Basil Wells. Then let's see . . . you have Fennel and McDowell . . . where is Gardiner F. Fox and Rocklynne? Um, guess Rocklynne has stopped writing, for STFiction zines, at least. But De Pina is writing again. Get him! Of course, for new material, there are lots of guys. One Ed Cox for instance . . . heheh, one of these days . . . BEWARE!

I haven't tried locking myself in a closet yet; when that happens, I'll be overdue in a looney-bin, but for a definition of science-fiction . . . well, if I try, I will end up in one!

You know darned well guys have been trying to define this for years. But . . . they say now that STF is a story based on scientific knowledge of today forecasting and experimenting with possible advances these sciences will make and their effect on humanity. I'd go along with that quite a lot, but also sorta call it a literature (YES, YES, YES, LITERATURE!) of what the future may possibly be. What may be beyond the stars (even now), what Man may find in his own small system of planets. Science fiction explores and tests new ideas and inventions and what they may do to our culture. It has made many predictions (and still does) of what may (and has) happen(ed) when the atomic bomb and nower is used. That I consider as proof. Looks like this is getting beyond a mere definition but you are getting my idea.

STFanatically,

ED COX, THE MAINE-IAC

AGAIN, NO STF IN PS!

806 Oak Street
Runnemeade, N. J.

DEAR LINT-HEADED PTERODACTYL (Don't blame me for the salutation. It is your own fault):

I liked the Winter PLANET STORIES; so much did I like it that I am writing this, my first PLANET-bound epistle. *The Dead Star Rover* by Abernathy was much better than that author's recent *Hostage of Tomorrow*. I am not any authority on science-fiction (or anything else for that matter) but *The Dead-Star Rover* impresses me as a very original story, perhaps deserving of the label of "classic"? (*But of course!*—Ed.)

I like the cover very much. At least nobody can insult Anderson by saying that the cover illustrates a scene from the featured story like someone did in the last issue. The cover was quite an abstraction on the story: It's confoozin' but amoozin'.

Biggest gripe of the issue for me was *Let the Ants Try* by MacCreigh. It deals with time-paradoxes, but yet it is written in a dull, uninteresting way. Surely time paradoxes are not so commonplace that Gordy can suggest casually that they give the ants a chance. The author tried to pack a lot of events into a short story; as a result the story reads like the outline of a novel. MacCreigh should study short story technique. Bradbury, whom I compare, not in style but in effect, with the best of Poe, would merely have taken, if he had written the story, the atomic destruction of Detroit and would have written a GEM of a short story.

The Night Has a Thousand Eyes was the best of the short stories. The de Courcys turn out some good stuff; this is better than the sad tale of Goma's follies.

The short stories were all fair filler material, nothing sensational. The illustrations were better than they have been for a few issues.

Emmett McDowell returns to the crumbling halls of PS and all the sad relics and worn ancient tapestries seem to glow with their original beauty that they once knew in the Golden Age. *Sword of Fire* was splendid except for the ending. Please.

Emmett, haven't you heard the old chestnut: "Two is company and three is a nuisance." Why couldn't you let Lete get Jupiter; I don't care for Tabak.

I am nearly beyond my limit and I have not even mentioned la Vizi. Give original pics to — (short pause for mental gymnastics) — Wilkie Conner, Lewis Sherlock, and Phillip Waggoner. I see the Vizigraph still remains, daringly hanging on though spattered with Venusian mud from the vicious pollsters (or should I say poll-cats?) and weighted down by the numerous orchids presented by Chad Oliver so that his flow of PS originals would not be interfered with.

I am now going to define science-fiction for you and I am SURE that it will not agree with your definition. This letter, once I get started, is liable to stretch into extra pages, but I am sure (?) you won't mind; after all, you're only the editor. (But my shears are sharp.—Ed.)

I shall now proceed to shock you. NONE OF THE STORIES PRINTED IN THE PRESENT ISSUE OF PLANET STORIES CAN BE CLASSIFIED AS SCIENCE-FICTION. Take it easy, editor, we are now over the worst part. You have already ripped out half your hair; don't pull out the other one! Calm down, old fellow. I should have realized the shock would be too much for your heart. Oh, well, it looks like PS is going to have a new editor. (Sigh) Most of the stories PLANET publishes are, according to MY definitions, merely scientific melodrama—NOT science-fiction. Also, according to me, Science-Fiction is not Melodrama; and vice-versa . . .

I see Bradbury is returning next ish. Hooray, now I know the Spring PLANET STORIES will be good.

Definitely STFanatically I sign myself,

DAVE HAMMOND

YOU TWO SHOULD MEET

Box 49
Runnemede, New Jersey

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just devoured (nearly) the entire contents of the latest PLANET STORIES and I liked every story with the exception of *Let the Ants Try*.

The Dead-Star Rover was an epic novel and it was well liked by this fellow. I only wish that mankind had not been saved at the end of the story. If Abernathy had not ended the tale as he did, he could write sequels. (Like Brackett does.) He could still write sequels, of course, but they wouldn't be as good. I would like to read a story from, say, a buzzard's view point, or a snail's, or a dragon's. It was still extra special.

I had a good deal of trouble getting this issue. (Yes, Editor, the next time I have to fly to the Moon newsstand I am going to charge the ticket to PLANET's Lousy Parasite! Don't forget!)

Emmett McDowell was swell. I will never forget this author's wonderful *The Wandering Egos*. Talk about good reading!!! *Sword of Fire*, while not up to the terrific standard set by the aforementioned story, did credit to the name of McDowell. Hey! Editor, you said McDowell is a pen name. What is the real name? Algernon Gurngry, perhaps?? Or maybe Fitzwater Mc-Snort? Well, if you won't tell, it doesn't matter. (He was christened Robert Emmett McDowell.—

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Ed.) To paraphrase a quotation: "A story, by Ray Bradbury, by any other name would read as well", or so everyone thought until they heard of the REFERENT.

Throw those originals to Ganley, Waggoner, and Conner. The originals that you don't send to the winners, put where you usually put them. Then mail me your wastebasket! I'll give you a break and not try to define science-fiction.

Yours truly,

DAVID VAN JENNETTE

THEY ALL SAY GHAA!

129 Edgemere Street
Fayetteville, N. Y.

DEAR PAYNE-IN-THE-NECK:

A few comments on the winter (brr!) issue. Ghaa! What a lousy cover.

Where's Brackett? We want Brackett, Brackett, BRACKETT!!!

The stories were all fine except the ones beginning on pages 2, 70, 29, 36, 42, and 85. La Vizi was swell. I don't think much of the new heading, though.

Who cut out the "Raise Hamsters" ad *\$&;:() (&""::;)*(*-!#! This is usually the best story in the whole book!

Why don't you start a fanzine department? Then you could review my Super-Slobzine entitled "Slightly Different" (excuse me while I get in a little plug.) It costs only one thin dime, and uh—and uh—Oh well, it's cheap, anyway.

There's a cute little BEM waiting out in the car for me, so good-bye, you limp-eared pterodactyl.

ALAN M. GRANT

WE ASKED FOR THIS!

Box 1296
Levelland, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

SCIENCE FICTION may be defined as the feigned systematization of such departments of the mind as are given over to the investigation of admittedly illogical phenomena occurring at unexpected places in the several departments of matter. (Wow!—Ed.)

In the coupling together of any two nouns ordinarily opposed to the accepted definition of each other we invariably obtain an intermediate meaning that bears but slight resemblance to either primary. The nouns so coupled lose their immediate identities and become territorial markers rather than subjective boundaries, and the use of such hyphenated nouns is ordinarily restricted to some definite application.

Science is not a fiction because it is neither feigned nor invented, and by no stretch of the imagination can it be termed a legal assumption for the purpose of convenience in the furtherance of justice. Science is the systematized knowledge of some one or more departments of mind or matter, and Fiction is the accounting in prose form for the imagined results of an imaginary sequence

in physical events. The two words are as radical in meaning as is North and South, for they shade the meaning of each other in much the same manner.

Since Science is not a fiction and Fiction is not a science, Science Fiction is neither a science nor a fiction. It is neither fact nor phantasy but rather something phantastically factual which can be neither proved nor disproved. Proved, it becomes scientific. Disproved, it becomes fictional. Only when absolute proof or disproof is lacking may the contents of a story be rightly called Science Fiction.

Thus the writer of a story whose locale is that of another planet gains all the advantages of evolving an imaginary world in which his own mental and physical laws become the governing principles, but takes on the obligation of consistency in the application of those laws. He must not, at any time, discard a stated law for the convenience of furthering the plot to his story by a shift to laws he has previously pronounced inapplicable on that particular planet. In so doing he brands himself incapable of staying within his own laws, proving that his imagined world is based on Fiction to the exclusion of Science.

I might add that, to my notion, Science Fiction reaches its full height only when the author keeps his characters and events within those limits he himself unfolds as the plot develops, and refuses to break any one of such stated precepts for no better reason than the one that his leading character must somehow emerge triumphant.

By abolishing all property rights just long enough to loot some Federal Treasury we could all become rich—but could we keep it? (*What day is today?*—Ed.)

Sincerely,

R. A. BRADLEY

IS MAD FOR THE ADS

235 Westchester Avenue
Port Chester, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just wandered through the Winter Ish. Purty good. The ads in the back show a decided improvement. Why not leave out the Viz and print more ads? Come to think of it, why not leave out the stories and . . . but I suppose that's asking too much.

On to the cover. How in &\$**1) (' is the blonde attached to the Bem? Scotch tape, mayhap? Also, my befuddled, tired, little mind wonders why she doesn't use the business end of her little dandy atom shooter. Our hero has a pained look, no doubt from the effects of being plugged by the purple man's spaghetti sprayer.

The stories, I'll grudgingly have to admit, are just about beyond reproach. Anything by McDowell is OK with yours truly, and MacCreigh's effort made good reading on the seventh attempt. I spent the first six wondering who screamed anyway. Now I know. It was a scream of Payne.

Goombye

THEODORE MEAD
(The Great One)

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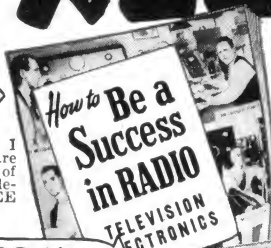
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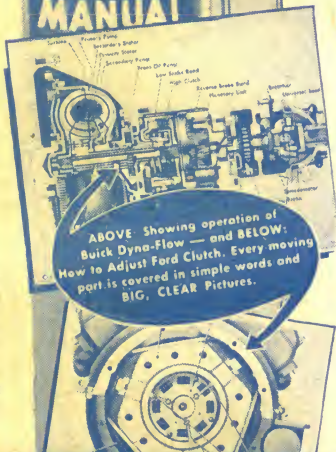
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